

Red vs Blue: The Master Chief Saga

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Summary: An alternate version of the happenings after season 4 of RvB. O'Malley possesses Sarge and vanishes while Master Chief comes to the aid of the Reds. Intense battle sequences, mild language. Complete.

1. Godsend

Red vs. Blue:

The Master Chief Saga

Chapter I

"But Sarge, the ship's coming all the way from Earth! It could take weeks, months, even years to get here!" Private Donut shouted. Suddenly, out of the sky, a Pelican-class transport fell out of the sky only millimeters away from Donut's face and crashed to the ground with a thud. Donut followed suit. The close encounter was too much for his fragile demeanor and he fainted.

"Ship's here," Private Simmons declared.

"Shotgun," Private Grif said. While Grif was imagining what the shotgun position would be like in the Pelican, The rear hatch of the Pelican opened and out walked the most terrifying and lethal soldier that ever lived. Two tons of MJOLNIR armor and pure muscle made its way past the rocks up to the red squad. The very soil his armored boots touched seemed to shy away in fear. Even the mighty rocks that jutted up from the landscape that had been both allies in strategy and enemies in ambushes now only served to intensify the lethal persona that now approached. Simmons stepped forward.

"Were you sent by Red Command?" he asked the soldier.

"Affirmative. I am Master Chief Petty Officer SPARTAN 117. What's the situation Private Simmons?" the Master Chief asked.

"Well, sir, do you want the long story or the short?"

"I think, due to the speed at which I was sent here, the short version will suffice," Master Chief replied.

"Ok. The mortal enemy of the Red and Blue teams was at the Blue Base. He's an evil AI who takes over people by getting into their armor through the radios in the suit. He's gone now, but a Blue guy came out here with his tank and now we're pinned down behind these rocks. There's a pregnant guy at the Blue Base, and we need to get back to our base."

Master Chief took in all the information slowly. He was confused about the pregnant guy, but ignored it, as there were more pressing matters that needed attention. Without skipping a beat, the Chief began to take charge of the situation.

"We deal with the immediate threat first," he said. The Chief grabbed the rocket launcher that was slung around his shoulder and fired a round at the tank. The rocket impacted with the turret base where the ammunition was stored. The explosion tore the turret off of its base and caused the rest of the tank to burn in a fiery inferno.

"Now about this mortal enemy of yours," the Chief asked. "You said he takes over the armor systems by infecting a host through their radios?"

"Yes sir," Simmons replied.

"Who was the last member of your squad to use the radio?" the Chief asked.

Grif, Simmons and Donut, who had recovered from his unconscious state and rejoined the group, all slowly turned to where Sarge was standing, but he was gone.

"He was right there," Donut said. "Oh no! If O'Malley got a hold of Sarge . . ."

"Don't worry," the Chief said. He put a reassuring hand on the nervous soldier's shoulder. "We'll deal with this one step at a time. In the end, we'll put this O'Malley character down for good and get your Sergeant back safe and sound."

"I hate to break up the party, but those Blue guys aren't going to be too happy that we blew up their precious tank," Grif stated. "I think we should get back to base."

"I agree. Ok, Red Squad, in accordance with Red Army Naval Protocol, Article One, Section Seven, Subsection Fifteen, Paragraph Eighty Nine, I am taking control of this operation. My primary objectives were to eliminate any Blue threats in this canyon and capture the Blue Flag, and that is what I intend to do."

"What about Sarge?" Simmons asked. "Shouldn't we find him first? If we got him back, we would have five guys on our team! We would be able to send the Blues back into whatever hole they crawled out of!"

"Sarge has really rubbed off on you," Grif said.

"Shut up, Grif," Simmons replied.

"Or are you trying to take his place since, you know, he's possessed and all."

"Shut UP, Grif."

"Well, look at the bright side. Now, Since there are two people in Sarge's mind, you can kiss twice as much ass than you have before!"

"Grif, Shut up!"

"Quiet, both of you! Now listen, we can't just go off and perform a Search and Rescue operation without any Intel," Master Chief interrupted. "It might take a while to eliminate all these Blue forces, so that should give us enough time to plan and coordinate our strategy for getting the Sergeant back."

"Are you good with a sniper?" Grif asked.

"I am proficient with all UNSC issue weaponry, yes. Why do you ask?" Master Chief responded.

"The Blues over there, they're probably the worst fighters in the whole army. You could just pick each one off and be done with it in less than ten minutes."

"Well, I could do that, but when I was with my old team, I was more of a rifleman myself. Linda . . ." the Chief paused, remembering his friend. "she was our sniper. The best I've ever seen."

"So, was she your girlfriend?" Grif asked.

"What? No, no, see, our squad was trained to work as a team since we were six years old," the Chief explained. "Our squad was tightly knit together. We were like siblings."

"Except that you weren't," Grif said.

"Biologically, no," the Chief responded, confused.

"Well, was she hot?"

"She was very beautiful; red hair, green eyes and a face that could stop a whole armada of enemy troops dead in space."

"Wow. So, why isn't she here?" Simmons asked. "If she's as good as you said, we could use the help."

"She's recovering from severe plasma burns," The Chief explained sadly. "Elites are mean bastards."

"What's an Elite?" Donut asked.

"An, uh, advanced special ops Blue Soldier. They use advanced plasma weaponry. They're very . . . advanced" The Chief said. "But enough chatter. Let's get back to base. Those Blues are probably on their

way over here as we speak."

The soldiers of Red Squad ran from the cover of the rocky outcropping as fast as they could, crossing the open space of the grassland in seconds. They ran around back behind the base and entered the hangar.

"Nice setup you've got here," the Chief said with approval. "Alright, let's get down to business. Simmons, from what Red Command told me, you temporarily betrayed Red Team because nobody believed you about seeing the tank that I destroyed and turned Blue."

"But you believe me that it was real, right?" Simmons asked.

"Well, I can't say that I destroyed a figment of your imagination. That's a job for a therapist," The Chief replied. "Now, you managed to infiltrate the Blue Base, correct?"

"Yeah, it was exactly the same as this base . . . except with a lot more blue," Simmons answered.

"Good. With this information, we should easily be able to infiltrate their base and locate the Blue Flag. Then we can proceed to kill every living thing there that isn't red. Or jade."

"Sir, can I ask a question?" Donut asked.

"Of course, Private Donut. According to my records, you are the only soldier here to actually take possession of the Blue Flag. Any input from your perspective would be greatly appreciated."

"What? He thought he was buying it at the store!" Grif said angrily.

"Well, it isn't about getting the flag. I just want to know what makes it so darn important. We've been fighting out here for years, and all I know is that it's a flag, and it is important to the Blue team. Why is it so important?"

The Chief took a deep breath. "What I'm about to tell you is classified information. You are to take this with you to the grave, understand? Good. In each flag, there is a microscopic computer. It has in its core a piece of technology so unbelievably powerful that it could spell certain doom for anyone that it is used against. However, each flag only has one half of the computer. When the two flags are combined, the flag poles are fused together and are redesigned into a super laser weapon capable of turning an entire country into dust and ashes. The laser reduces all organic matter to its base components and vaporizes it. Inorganic material is turned to rubble. Soil is turned to glass. Water turns to steam. This laser is so powerful, that the human race couldn't trust itself with it and so, they created the Red and Blue armies. Completely oblivious as to their true purpose, the armies fought one another for years and the secrets of the flag were safe. Until now."

"O'Malley. He found out the flags' secret and is planning on using it to destroy all life in the galaxy!" Simmons said.

"Bingo," replied the Chief. "We need to get the Blue's flag ASAP. If we can use the laser as bait, we can get O'Malley out of the Sergeant

and stop him from his conquest of galactic domination. First we need to get rid of the Blues. Once we have complete control over this canyon, we can operate freely here without worry of interruption. How about it, guys? You in?"

"You bet, Master Chief, sir. I'm behind you one hundred percent!" Simmons said.

"We get to save the galaxy? Awesome! I'm with you sir!" Donut said.

"Not like I have much of a choice. You'd probably just kill me if I said 'no' since I know all that top-secret info and whatnot," Grif said disappointedly.

"Yup," Master Chief replied. "Alright, now that that's settled, let's begin the first phase of our mission. Operation: Red Rage.

2. Infiltration

Chapter II

_A week has passed. Red squad is struggling to get Operation RR to work, but between Donut's suggested dance routines and Grif's constant attempts to incorporate break segments into the plan, they were getting nowhere fast. _

"This isn't going to work," the Master Chief said with an exasperated sigh. He pressed his fingers to his temples and began to massage them. "Donut, we can't do your 'Ain't No Holla Back, Girl' routine. We just don't have that kind of time. It's a shame, too, because I just got that step, pivot, step part down right."

"Aw man, that's bananas," Donut said sadly.

The Chief walked away from the makeshift table littered with dozens of possible attack plans. "And we absolutely cannot stop for breaks, Grif," Chief said. "There's just no time."

"Oh, so we can perform a dance routine out in the middle of the canyon, but we aren't allowed to stop for five minutes to take a nap?" Grif snapped.

"The dance routine was supposed to be a diversion so Simmons could sneak into the base and take the flag," the Chief explained. "Taking a break would only make us easy targets."

"I wish Sarge was here," Grif complained. "He'd just make us charge the base and shoot at them until we're out of ammo. Then we'd retreat, or advance toward future victories or something like that."

"Nobody's running out of ammo or retreating on my clock," Chief said.

"I could try to buy it from them again," Donut suggested.

"Too risky," the Chief said. "Even the stupidest enemies aren't that stupid."

"Wait . . . yes they are!" Simmons shouted. He pulled up the files on all the Blues that he made during the time when they worked together on a computer. Caboose's file popped up on the screen. Master Chief leaned in closer.

"Private Michael J. Caboose? What about him?" the Chief asked.

"We could trick him into helping us! You remember about the whole teleporter crisis, right?" Simmons asked.

"Yes, Private Caboose was sent to a seemingly miniaturized version of our current location with the Sergeant," Master Chief recalled. "They encountered another Red and Blue war and were only able to escape thanks to Caboose's unprecedented brute strength and hostility. How does this help us?"

"He's strong, but it makes up for his complete stupidity," Simmons continued. "See, Donut was captured by the Blues at one point and he made friends with Caboose. We could use this to our advantage!"

"We could send Donut over to the Blue Base at night and have him paint Caboose red, making him think he's on our side," Grif said eagerly. "Then, he could wake up Caboose and have him bring the flag back to our base! It's the perfect plan!"

"No, it . . . wait, that is the perfect plan," Master Chief said confused. "How did you think of that so quickly?"

"If it's a plan that doesn't involve me doing any work, I'm happy to contribute," Grif said happily.

"Ok, that's the best plan we've had all week so let's go with it. Simmons, Donut, come with me. Grif, you stay here," the Chief ordered.

"Yes sir," Grif said.

The other three headed down to the lower level of the base and began to fine tune the plan.

"Simmons, you'll stay back with a sniper and keep us informed of any enemy activity. Donut and I will infiltrate the base and paint Caboose's armor red," the Chief explained. "We'll extract the idiot and the flag, commandeer their M12 LRV and pick you up on the way back. Are we clear?"

"Sir, yes sir," Donut and Simmons replied in unison.

"Forecast calls for heavy rainfall tonight, and then clear skies for the rest of the month. If we want to save your Sergeant before its too late, we do this tonight," the Chief said grimly. "It is currently eight thirty p.m. Eastern Standard Time and it has just started sprinkling. We will launch our infiltration at nine thirty p.m. EST when the rain is in full swing."

"Why do you go by Eastern Standard Time?" Simmons asked. "Why not military time?"

"Oh please, who uses military time?" the Chief asked.

"Everyone in the army," Simmons replied.

"Exactly," the Chief stated. "If the Blues ever got a hold of our mission data, all the times would be screwy. They wouldn't know when we're attacking because our clocks are set differently."

****Meanwhile . . .****

"Hey Tucker, you remembered to set all of our clocks to Eastern Standard Time, right?" Church asked.

"Yeah, now stop talking. I'm trying to teach Tucker Junior how to say pimp. Come on, pimp. Pi-mp."

****Back at Red Base . . .****

"That is a pretty impressive strategy, sir," Simmons commented.

"It is, isn't it? Alright, let's go over this again. The timing has to be flawless," the Chief said.

The three Red soldiers reviewed the plan for the next hour, going over every excruciating detail as the rain outside steadily grew stronger. Occasional shouts and curses from Grif echoed down into the hangar whenever the satellite signal was lost for the TV. By nine thirty, the three soldiers had memorized each of their parts and began to gather their gear. The rain was at its peak performance now, coming down in endless sheets. There was no lightning, so they didn't have to take that as a variable in their mission success. The sound of the rain would give them a clear getaway when they took the warthog, and if Simmons was forced to neutralize any targets, the rainfall would mask the sound of his sniper fire. Nine thirty came, and the three soldiers crept out into the rain.

"Alright Simmons, I'm marking the position I need you to cover with a waypoint," the Chief said through the comm. system.

An arrow appeared on Simmons' HUD and he took a prone position on the hill. A blue light winked on Master Chief's HUD signaling that Simmons was in position.

"Ok Donut, let's go."

The two soldiers ran as fast as they could towards the base. They stopped and took cover near a trio of rocks just outside the base.

"Ok Donut, we're going in," the Chief declared. "Get that paintbrush ready, there's no turning back."

To Be Continued

3. Exfiltration

Chapter III

After formulating a plan on how to secure the Blue Flag, Master Chief and Donut made their way to the Blue Base in a daring attempt

to take Private Caboose hostage . . . _

Master Chief and Private Donut silently crept into the base. The pitch black of night and the torrential downpour masked their approach, and would keep them inaudible during their hunt for Caboose. Master Chief put his back to the wall and peeked around the corner, and saw that there were no hostiles. The Chief waved his hand forward and waited for Donut to take up a position in the room. After ten seconds of inaction, the Chief looked back and saw Donut, staring at him.

"What are you doing?" the Chief whispered annoyed.

"I'm waiting for you to move," Donut replied in a similar hushed tone.

"When I make this motion," the Chief repeated the hand signal, "you're supposed to go into the next room and secure a position."

"Why me?" Donut asked. "You're the one with the guns! All I have is a can of red paint and a brush. What am I supposed to do if I see someone, paint them to death?"

The Chief lowered his head. Although Donut was clearly disobeying a direct order from a superior, he did present a good point. The Master Chief silently moved into the main room. There were no roofs covering the central areas of either base, so rain water freely poured into the base. Fortunately, whoever designed the outposts were at least semi-intelligent; the floor of the middle level was slanted towards the hole, so the rain water didn't build up. The Chief glanced over his shoulder and saw Donut staring at a wall.

"Donut," he whispered. "What are you doing?"

"I found out where Caboose is," Donut said. "Here, look."

The Chief came up next to Donut and saw that there was a note on the wall:

****Caboose, I know that I already asked you a thousand times, but I think you will probably listen to a piece of paper better than you listen to other people. Please, stay out of our rooms. Mine in particular. I hope you'll read this, since it is right outside of your room. You can't be that dumb.****

****P.S. Tucker, keep that damned alien baby on a leash or something. It keeps messing with my sniper rifle.****

The two soldiers looked at each other, then at the door that was directly behind them. It was already ajar, so they quietly entered the room. The quarters were filthy. Candy wrappers littered the floor; coloring books and crayons were strewn across a table and a standard issue SMG was propped against the far wall. Laying in a cot with a Hello Kitty blanket draped over him slept Private Caboose.

"There's the target. Begin with the paint job, Donut. I'll keep watch," ordered the Chief.

"Okey dokey, sir," Donut responded.

Donut carefully removed the blanket off of Caboose and began to paint his standard issue blue armor standard issue red. The whole front side was finished in a matter of minutes and was also masterfully done.

"How did you do that so quickly," inquired the Chief.

"From fingernails to armor, if you need something painted pretty and pronto, I'm your Private," Donut replied happily. "Now I need to get him turned over so I can paint his back."

Suddenly, Caboose began to stir in his sleep. The Chief raised his Battle Rifle at Caboose as a precaution. Caboose sat up in his bed and looked at Donut.

"W-who are . . . oh my God! Colonel McMuffin! You came back!" Caboose shouted with glee. A loud thunder clap echoed across the canyon and through the base, saving them from an unwanted blown cover.

Donut said nothing, but looked to the Chief for help. Donut could do nothing in his current situation, so the Chief had to think fast. Then he had an idea; possibly better than Grif's idea. The Chief lowered his rifle, walked over to Caboose and knelt by his side.

"Gamma twelve, I am the Master Chief. Do you remember me?" the Chief asked.

"Who's Gamma twelve?" Caboose asked.

"Darn, the amnesia serum must still be active," Master Chief said "Medic Donut, please go bring the transport to the front of the base. We need to extract Gamma twelve immediately." The Chief then opened a private channel to Donut. "I'll explain everything later, Donut. Just play along for now."

"Uh, ok. Whatever you say," Donut answered. He was unsure what the Chief had up his gauntlet, but he knew it must be good. Donut ran out of the base to get the warthog.

"Gamma twelve, you are a Red Army Special Operative. You were sent to Blood Gulch Outpost Alpha at the start of the war to gather Intel on the Blues. Do you remember any of this?" the Chief asked.

". . . who are you again?" Caboose asked.

"Damnit, Caboose, think! Remember when you blew up your superior officer with the M808B Main Battle Tank?"

"Yeah, good times . . . good times. I miss Sheila."

"That was a mission that you successfully carried out. In fact, since then, you have gone on to become a legend in the Spec Ops task force!"

"I have?"

"Yes! You managed to temporarily disable the droid that your

superior's ghost inhabited. When he left the droid's body, it was able to reprogram its secure files and weapon programs with a series of new firewalls and passwords. You saved us a lot of trouble there, and there was the time you-" the Chief was cut off by a radio transmission from Donut.

"I have the warthog in front of the base, sir. I'm ready to go," Donut announced.

"Excellent. We'll be out shortly," the Chief responded. He put his hand on Caboose's shoulder. "I'll fill you in on all the details later, but the Blues have discovered your real status, and they're sending an assassin to take you out as we speak. We need to get you back to Red Base, where you'll be safe."

Caboose looked down at his hands and saw that they were red. He was surprised by the color change and looked at the rest of his armor. From what he could see, it was now red.

"Your camouflage has been deactivated since you are no longer required to spy on the Blues," the Chief explained. "Come on, Caboose, we need to go."

Caboose, who was deep in thought, got up, retrieved his gun, and followed the Chief back into the main room. If anything, the storm had intensified in the last half hour. The winds were reaching speeds of sixty miles per hour. Lightning strikes pounded into the ground, blowing rocks and dirt in all directions. Thunder roared like an angry beast over head and shook the whole canyon. The Blue Flag was flapping wildly in the wind.

"I need you to grab the flag, Gamma twelve. Since you were registered as a Blue soldier, you're the only one who can take it," the Chief said.

Caboose silently complied and took the flag from its base. The Chief nodded and the two began to make their way out of the base. Then Simmons came on over the radio, his tone urgent.

"Master Chief? Sir, I have a visual. There is a target enclosing on your position. Hurry up in there."

"Roger that, Simmons. I'm extracting Caboose and the Flag now. Over."

The Chief rounded a corner, and came face to face with a black armored Spartan holding a shotgun.

"End of the line, big boy," Tex said triumphantly.

Master Chief turned to Caboose.

"Caboose . . . run,"

To Be Continued

4. Confrontation

Chapter IV

_After a successful infiltration of the Blue Base, Donut went to retrieve the warthog. Master Chief and Caboose secured the flag and were about to return it to Red Base, but Tex had other plans . . .

-

Caboose ran. He ran faster than he ever did in his life. People were trying to kill him. People who he thought were his _friends_ were trying to kill him. People who he thought were his enemies were trying to save him. Caboose decided that thinking was too dangerous. He ran out of the back of the base, and fell off the platform. Two ramps went up either side of the hangar and connected to the platform. Caboose forgot about it in all the excitement and fell fifteen feet to the muddy ground below. He picked up the flag and wiped the muck off of his visor. Rain washed most of it away, and Caboose began to make his way around to the front of the base. He saw the headlights of the warthog through the rain and ran to them. It was a welcome sight. Donut waved to him as he got closer, and he took a seat next to the familiar driver.

"Good job, Caboose, you got the flag!" Donut said impressed. "Where's the Chief?"

"Tex," answered Caboose. He suddenly realized that he was exhausted. "Tex attacked us. Master Chief said to run."

"Well, we can't just leave without him," Donut said. He keyed into Simmons' signal.

"Simmons? Chief is in trouble," Donut reported. "I need you to come over here and take the flag back to base."

"Roger that. I'm on my way," Simmons replied.

"What do we do now?" Caboose asked.

"We can't go in there to help because we'd just get in the way. Chief's a tough guy, he can take care of himself," said Donut.

* * *

>Master Chief blocked yet another attempted melee attack thrown out by Tex with his hand. The blow sent him back a few steps.<p><p>

She's strong; I'll give her that thought Chief.

He made an attempt to punch Tex in the midsection, but she deftly dodged the blow.

She's fast; I'll give her that too Chief added.

Master Chief attempted to cross chop Tex, but she grabbed his arms before they began their deadly descent. She then used them as anchorage as she back-flipped, kicking him in the jaw.

I guess I have to give her 'calculating' as well. If I have to take much more of this, I'll end up giving her my social security number too.

The Chief blocked a drop-kick by Grabbing Tex's foot. He slammed her into a wall, then another. He then slammed her weakened form into the ground with all of his might. Tex tried to move, but Master Chief was on her, pinning her battered body to the ground under his armored boot.

"Who do you work for, bounty hunter scum?" the Chief demanded.

Tex, who was apparently stronger than she appeared, rolled out from under the Chief's boot and side-swiped him, knocking him to the ground. The attack caught him off guard, and Tex took the opportunity to repay the Chief's kindness. She pinned his upper arms to the ground under her knees. They both stayed motionless for several seconds, breathing heavily. Tex reached out and gently, almost sensually, stroked the Chief along the side of his helmet; then she back-handed him across his helmet. The unexpected blow knocked the Chief's head around in his helmet and made him see stars.

"Normally, people who call me scum don't live very long thereafter." Tex said sadistically. "And you're no exception."

Tex pulled a combat knife out from her left boot and brought it to the Chief's unarmored throat. The Chief was prepared and brought his feet up to Tex's head. They clamped onto it like a vice grip and he kicked his legs back, launching her away. She flew back and crashed into a wall face first. She fell to the floor and got up just in time to evade a deadly blow from the Chief. She realized that he wasn't holding back as a fist-sized crater remained where the punch had impacted the wall. Tex wasn't strong enough to take on the Chief toe to toe, and he was proving it by slowly cornering her where he would deliver the death blow. Tex evaded one last punch as it took out a decent sized chunk of a wall. The Chief followed through with an uppercut that could flip a tank. His fist connected with Tex's stomach. Blood sprayed out of her mouth and clouded the inside of her visor. She began to cough violently, spraying more blood and mucus across the inside of her helmet. She looked into the Chief's visor, awaiting the inevitable. Master Chief delivered one last punch with such a force that Tex's breast plate split in two. Hydrostatic gel, mixed with blood, seeped through the crack in the armor. The momentum of the punch slammed Tex into the wall behind her so hard that she was able to look down and see that her nearly lifeless body was stuck in the wall right above the hole that dropped down into the hangar below. She looked back up at the Chief who stared back at her. Tears were streaming down Tex's face.

"Son of . . . a . . ." Tex uttered. She was too weak to finish the sentence.

Gravity began to take over and Tex's body was pulled away from the wall and it fell with a splash into the water-logged hangar below. Her blood began to mix with the water. The area around the lifeless bounty hunter was now a sickening dark red color. Master Chief looked down at his fallen adversary. It had seemed like years since he had a worthy opponent. He looked at the knife in his hand. It was the knife Tex had almost killed him with. The steel handle bore an inscription that read "T&C" encased in a heart. The Chief disregarded it and turned to walk away. He casually tossed the weapon over his shoulder. It bounced off the floor and fell down into the hole. The blade made contact with Tex's neck, penetrated the thin material around the vertebrae and sunk into her flesh up to the handle. The Chief walked

outside into the ferocious storm. Winds had picked up to seventy five miles per hour and lightning strikes were becoming more frequent and powerful. The thunder overhead boomed through the skies and shook the ground. Donut and Caboose were waiting in the warthog outside the base.

"Master Chief! You're ok!" Donut shouted.

"Yes, I'm fine Donut. How are you Caboose?" the Chief asked.

"I am really, really scared. The sky is angry at me." Caboose answered shakily.

The Master Chief turned to Donut and opened a private channel. "He's ok with the whole 'ex-spy' business?" the Chief inquired.

"Yeah, he asked a couple of questions, but then we started talking about stuff, like his impeccable taste in bed sheets." Donut answered.

"Excellent work, Donut. You've just made our job a whole lot easier. Keep it up and you can expect a promotion in the future." The Chief said. He turned to Caboose. "Gamma twelve, ready to head home?"

"Yes sir, Mister Chafe, sir!" Caboose responded enthusiastically.

"It's Master Chief, Gamma twelve, Master Chief. Hey, where's the flag?"

"Oh, I had Simmons come and get it. We waited here for you." Donut reported. "I even convinced Grif to take over for Simmons while he brought the flag into the base."

"Well, from what I hear, motivating Grif to do anything is a near impossible task," the Chief said impressed.

"It wasn't easy, sir, but we already lost Sarge . . . we don't need to lose anyone else." The sadness in Donut's voice was apparent and the Chief decide to drop the subject.

"Well, you did exceptional. Both of you did. Now," the Chief hopped into the gunner position, "get us the hell out of here."

"Yes sir!" Donut said.

The warthog sped through the night and storm back to the Red Base. There was a lot that needed to be done, and there was precious little time to do it in.

* * *

>A figure walked into the hangar of Blue base. A sniper rifle was slung around his shoulder. The man knelt next to the body lying face down in a puddle of water and blood.<p><p>

"A shame, Allison. You were quite useful," said the man with a distinct British accent.

A hand reached down to the data-chip slot in Tex's helmet and removed

the mission recording. A flash of lightning illuminated the hangar for a split second as the white gauntlet stuck the chip into a vacant slot into his armor. After several moments of processing the information, the man stood up.

"You disappoint me, Allison. Surely you could have done better. Ah well, you're dead now. Hopefully the . . ._next_ one won't be as foolish."

As he was talking, the man took a test tube from a pouch on his belt. He took a sample of the bloody water and, after closely inspecting it, returned the tube to its holster. The man then stood up. He turned and left the hangar silently. The storm was subsiding now, and his stealth craft would not remain hidden for long. He powered up the engines and rose out of the canyon. He glanced down at the pointless land formation and shook his head. If his employer succeeded in his mission, the canyon would soon be a smoldering crater twice its current size. Once the super weapon was complete, this entire planet, and any others that opposed his might, would fall . . .

To Be Continued

5. Information

Chapter V

The Master Chief dispatched Tex and left her dead body at the bottom of Blue Base. He then returned to Red Base with Privates Caboose and Donut to continue the mission . . .

Donut drove the warthog into the hangar of the base. Master Chief got off of the gunner position and walked over to Donut.

"I'm going upstairs to debrief the others. You keep Caboose occupied until I say its OK to bring him up, understand?" the Master Chief ordered.

"Debrief? I want to help!" Donut objected.

"I'm just going to tell them what happened, Donut. I appreciate your offer, but I'm perfectly capable of handling it on my own," the Chief said.

"Oh, _that_ kind of debrief. Never mind, I'll stay here."

"Are we going to have a sleep over? I forgot to bring my footsie pajamas!" Caboose exclaimed.

"Even better than a sleep over, you're going to stay with us from now on, Caboose! Uh, I mean, Gamma twelve," Donut exclaimed. "And don't worry, I have an extra pair of pajamas you can use, _and_ I have the exact same Hello Kitty blanket you do!"

". . . This is going to be the best sleep over," Caboose said.
"Ever."

"So, you understand? We have to continue to convince him that he is on our team until he actually believes it himself. That means we have to make him feel like he's a member of our squad," the Master Chief

explained.

"Does that mean we have to be nice to him?" Grif asked. The idea became less appealing with every passing minute.

"Of course not," the Chief replied. "We want to make him feel at home, so I need you two to act like his previous superior officers. Grif, since you eat a lot of food and are the laziest and most unmotivated, you are going to fill in the role of Private Tucker."

"So wait, I don't have to be nice to him? Sweet! Ok, so how do I act like Private Tucker?" Grif asked.

"Just act like you usually do," the Chief said. "The only difference between you two is that you didn't give birth to an alien baby."

"Whatever. I'm going to watch TV," Grif said. And with that, he left.

"Simmons, you are going to have to take the place of Private Church, since you both seem to have the shortest tempers," the Chief instructed. "And you both do the most yelling of your respective sides."

"You got it, sir. What roles will you and Donut fill?" Simmons asked.

"I know that Tex was just a bounty hunter, but she spent an awful lot of time with the Blue team, even though she wasn't paid for all of her time spent there," the Chief said. "She was, undoubtedly, the best fighter on the Blue team and probably bears more of a likeness to myself, so I will be filling that role."

"And Donut?"

"Donut and Caboose have already met. Donut has no counterpart, so he will be himself. This will work out nicely, because everyone here isn't as inclined to dislike Caboose as the Blues were."

"So, we still call him Caboose, right? We don't have to call him Gamma twelve?"

"No, only I call him that. I'm working out the bugs of my plan, but in the end, I think it will work flawlessly. Now, since Grif is busy being lazy and Donut is playing 'welcoming committee', you and I should prepare for our defenses. The Blues aren't going to be too happy that two of their soldiers are gone. Oh, and Simmons?"

"Yes sir?"

"About that Tex woman; I read an inscription on her combat knife that had a T and a C inside a heart. I guess T would stand for Tex, but what would the C stand for?"

"Tex used to date Private Church, sir. Perhaps the C stood for Church."

"Interesting. Let's go."

Master Chief and Simmons began going over previous defense strategies and plans and went about revising those ones and making new ones. A machine gun turret was placed on top of the base next to the teleporter. During an inspection of the hangar, the floor lifted up revealing a brand new M808B Main Battle Tank hidden beneath. After quickly scavenging Sheila's wreckage and finding her AI core, the tank was ready for action. Simmons had completely erased Sheila's memory so she wouldn't turn on the Reds. Caboose was especially excited by this. After securing more heavy weapons and ammo, Master Chief explained the best possible plan of action in case of an attack to the team. After he was sure that at least Simmons and Donut understood, the Chief dismissed everyone and was then contacted by Vic of Red Command on his radio.

"Hello Master Chief, calling Master Chief, are you there, dude?" Vic asked.

"Roger, Vic. Master Chief here, what do you need?" the Chief replied.

"Well, we got your message about your totally awesome win at the Blue Base, dude. Bravo." Vic said.

"Thank you Vic. We do our best."

"Glad to hear it. Ok, you also requested a new suit of armor with red with blue patches on the arms, head and legs?"

"Affirmative, Vic. Were you able to send it?"

"Oh, it's on its way, dude. I just wanted to tell you, we're trying this new FedEx shipping method. It should come out of your teleporter soon. Just a heads up for the very near future."

"I appreciate it, Vic. Anything else?"

"Oh yeah, according to our intelligence, the Blue guys found the dead chick in their basement this morning. They weren't too happy."

"That's to be expected."

"Well, the one guy was so mad, he hired about, hang on a second . . . uh, let me see here, Blue Base transactions, Blue Base transactions, Blue, oh here it is! Let's see, they hired six bounty hunters to come in and take you guys out. And they're on their way, dude."

"Six? Shouldn't be a problem. We just established a defensive perimeter around the base in the event that they retaliated."

"Oh good, dude! That's great news 'cause they got, let's see, a M808B Main Battle Tank, two warthogs with, oh that's cool, modified rocket launching gunner positions, and one of them is bringing enough rocket launcher supplies to take down a city. But you already got your defenses up, so I'll be seeing you later, dude. Vic out!"

"What? Vic! Wait! . . . Crap." Master Chief turned to the comm. system that ran through the base and pressed the red button. A loud alarm rang through the base and sounds of gear shuffling could be

heard in the various rooms. Simmons was the first one to arrive, his armor shining with a fresh gloss. Donut and Caboose arrived second and third respectively and Grif stormed into the room last. He carried his helmet in one hand and a razor in the other. Half of his face was clean-shaven. The other half still sported shaving cream. Grif quickly whipped the rest of the stuff off his face along with the rest of his beard. He then put his helmet back on and looked at the Chief, who hit the red button again, making the alarms shut off.

"The Blues have hired mercenaries to kill us. We must fight back. Grif, Simmons, you two take sniper rifles and pick off any targets you can. Donut, you take the turret and try to hold off any vehicles you can. Caboose, you take Sheila and blow up any mercenaries that get too close to the base. I'll sneak around behind them and try to take them out from behind. Let's move out!"

To Be Continued . . .

6. Retaliation and Exploration

Chapter VI

_Master Chief and Red Squad have successfully integrated Caboose into their ranks. Enraged over the death of Tex, Church sends a team of mercenaries to kill everyone at Red Base and avenge his girlfriend's murder . . . _

A shell from an M808B Main Battle Tank flew past Grif, missing his head by inches. The shell detonated against the canyon wall, throwing chunks of rock and clouds of dust in all directions.

"Damnit! Why are _we_ getting shot at? Caboose is on the front line with a tank and everyone decides to shoot at us," Grif shouted over the sounds of explosions and gunfire.

"They're obviously shooting at you because you pose the greatest threat," Donut suggested.

"Oh please," Grif said in a mockingly sarcastic tone. "This thing is just for show. I couldn't hit the broad side of a barn!"

Grif fired a round to prove his point, but the bullet struck the tire of one of the modified warthogs, causing it to spin out of control. The gunner bailed just before it crashed into a rock, exploded and killed the driver.

"Wow, Grif, you do suck," Simmons said. "That was the worst shot I've ever seen. Maybe you can agree with me, and then get a lucky shot on that **damn tank that has been shooting at us FOR THE LAST HALF HOUR!**"

"Simmons, bite me. Donut, stop screwing up my aim," Grif said.

"Screwing up your aim? I improved your aim!" Donut shouted.

"No, my aim was good when I couldn't hit anything. Now that I can hit stuff, my aim is bad," Grif explained. "Now, when Sarge comes back,

he's going to make me do more stuff because I'm actually a good shot."

"You were pretending to suck the whole time we've been stationed here?" Simmons asked confused.

"Hey, a man can keep his secrets from other men, can't he?" Grif asked.

"I don't believe in keeping secrets," Donut proclaimed.

"For the love of God, Donut, we know," said Grif. He shook his head to clear his mind of all the disgusting things Donut had told him over the years. "Look, I'll make you guys a deal; I make a bunch of good shots and you two take all the credit. That way, this gets done faster, I don't have to do any more work, and nobody gets hurt. Are we cool?"

"Sounds good to me," said Simmons.

Grif brought up the sniper rifle and peered down the scope.

"Grif, you know our visors automatically zoom in for us, right?" Donut asked concerned.

"Yes, Donut, I know," Grif said agitated. "I like doing it this way more, now please, be quiet. I need to concentrate."

Grif lined up the target reticule with the head of the mercenary that had escaped from the warthog explosion he caused. Then he decided to make it more interesting. The mercenary had just pulled out a grenade and was about to pull the pin. Grif shot the grenade dead-center. It exploded and the smoldering corpse of the mercenary flew back several hundred feet and crashed into a hill. Grif lined up his next target; the gunner of the remaining warthog. Rather than shooting his head, Grif aimed for the rocket launcher turret. He fired a round into the barrel of one of the rocket launchers. The explosion ripped the top half of the gunner off from his legs and sent him tumbling away. The legs fell out of what remained of the turret position and also tumbled away. Grif saw that the rear half of the warthog had caught fire and that the fire would eventually reach the fuel lines. It wasn't fast enough for Grif, who grudgingly decided to headshot the driver. The shot rang out and the driver slumped over in his seat. The warthog began driving around in erratic circles until it was blown into the air by a tank shell courtesy of Caboose and Sheila. Grif then sighted the mercenary who didn't ride in a warthog. He was trudging up over one of the steepest hills carrying two rocket launchers and sixteen rockets. Grif was about to shoot one of the rockets when he saw Master Chief sneak up behind the mercenary. The Chief put his hand across the man's visor and slit his throat with his combat knife. He then began to casually walk back to the Red Base.

"What is he doing?" Simmons said. "With that tank out there, he could get killed!"

Donut looked over at Caboose and Sheila and started laughing. "I don't think the Chief is in any danger, guys, check it out!"

Simmons and Grif both looked over at Caboose and Sheila and also

started laughing. Caboose had managed to flip the enemy tank over with Sheila and had gotten Sheila on top of the flipped tank. Smoke and fire was billowing out from underneath as the enemy tank caught on fire and the mercenary piloting it was burnt alive. Caboose was standing on top of Sheila and was waving his arms for help. Sheila was contributing by rotating her turret in circles. Master Chief jumped up on top of the tank, grabbed Caboose and jumped off. He then instructed Sheila to drive off of the other tank. Minutes later, all five of them were gathered around in the main room talking about the battle.

"I think it went exceptionally well, men. Congratulations. Intel says the remaining two blue bastards packed up and left, so we're in the clear." We can now move on to Phase Two of Operation: Red Rage." The Master Chief announced.

"Great. What's phase two?" Simmons asked.

"Phase Two is a recovery phase from phase one," the Chief said. "We've all seen enough action these past few days; I think we deserve a little R and R."

"Amen to that. How long does Phase Two last?" Grif asked eagerly.

"It lasts a week, Grif. I suggest everyone packs their gear during our break. We're headed out to that place with the creek for some reconnaissance when Phase Three begins." The Chief announced.

"Oh, I liked that place. The water was very pretty there," Caboose said.

"Well, pack your swim suit, Caboose, we'll be there for a few weeks before I initiate Phase Four." The Chief said.

"You have the first four phases of this operation planned out already?" Grif asked.

"Of course, I always have my plans set up before I put them into motion." The Chief replied.

"Just like any good leader, Grif," Simmons added.

"Thank you Private Kiss Ass. If any of you need me, I'll be watching TV." Grif said. He left the briefing room.

"Donut, before you go, I need you and Caboose to head over to Blue Base and see if they left any info there. If there is something, we may need it." Master Chief ordered.

"Yes sir, Faster Beef, sir," Caboose replied.

"Its Master Chief, Caboose, Master Chief!" he called after them as the two soldiers made for the warthog.

"Simmons, you and I are going to salvage what we can from the damaged vehicles. We need Sheila to be at her strongest while we're gone."

Master Chief and Simmons had just hauled the wreckage from the

damaged mercenary tank into the hangar when Donut called over the radio.

"Master Chief? We have a problem," he said.

"What is it, Donut? What's going on?" the Chief asked.

"Well, it's about Tucker's alien baby."

"What about it, Private?"

"They left him behind, sir! They left him, Andy and Doc behind!"

To Be Continued

7. New Recruits

Chapter VII

After successfully defeating the small mercenary army sent by the Blues, Master Chief initiated Phase Two of Operation: Red Rage, which ordered all soldiers to rest and recover from Phase One. During a short reconnaissance mission, Donut and Caboose discovered that Church and Tucker left the alien baby, Andy and Doc behind . . .

—

"Just stay put, Donut. Simmons and I are on our way," the Master Chief ordered.

"Roger that," Donut replied.

Donut turned his attention to the three beings that were left in the base. Medical Officer Dufresne, better known as 'Doc' was the one who greeted them.

"So, they just left you guys behind?" Donut asked.

"Yeah, they left us here all alone in a stinking box canyon in the middle of nowhere while they went off to some super secret base or whatever," fumed Andy.

Andy was a bomb built by Tex. He was supposed to explode and kill O'Malley, but after a few days of side tracking during the quest in which Tex disappeared and CrunchBite was killed, Andy had just given up on accomplishing his primary objective.

"Tucker didn't want to bring his baby with them, so they left me here too so I could take care of him," Doc said. "He's a good baby . . . thing, whatever he is. Andy and I were trying to teach him to not bite people when you guys showed up."

"Ow! Bad Tucker Junior, bad!" Caboose shouted from the next room.

"Yeah, apparently that didn't work so well," Andy said laughing.

"What I don't get is why they left you here, Andy," Donut said. "You would think an explosive device would come in handy while you're

hiding in a secret fortress."

"You would think that, wouldn't you? Well, they said I would be more useful here. They figured you guys would show up sooner or later, so they wanted me to explode and kill you." Andy explained.

Donut said nothing.

"Ah, don't worry. Those guys were jerks. I'm not gonna kill you."

"Hey, do you think we could stay at your base for a while?" Doc asked. "This place is nice and all, but I think we'd be better off with you guys."

"Well, I think it's a great idea, but you'd have to talk to the Chief about it." Donut said.

"Talk to the Chief about what?" asked the Master Chief.

"Oh, hey Chief! Listen, the Blue guys left these guys behind, do you think they could stay with us?" Donut asked.

"You aren't official Blue personnel?" the Chief asked Doc.

"I was on loan to both armies before O'Malley took over my body," Doc answered. "So no, I'm not a Blue."

"I was built by that Tex guy. I was with the Blues for a while, but I'm not the biggest fan. I don't think these blue stripes go well with my natural color. I think red would make me look slimmer," Andy said.

"Tex was a woman," the Chief corrected.

"Yeah, whatever you say, pal." Andy said.

"Well, you'll have to go through some tests and interrogations, but I think we can house two more over at our base," the Chief said.

"Wait, Chief, there's one more," Donut said. He turned to the room Caboose was in. "Caboose, come on out here, and bring the baby with you!"

Master Chief faced the door where Caboose was. He thought about what the baby alien would look like. Then he shuddered; whatever it was, one of the Blue soldiers had given birth to it. That made the Chief shudder again. Then, from out of the room came Caboose. Attached to his arm was the mouth of the alien baby. All four mandibles were anxiously nibbling at Caboose's forearm like a giant bone. The rest of the alien followed.

"What the-" memories started flooding the Chief's mind. Visions of combat and large alien warriors similar to the alien before him flashed before his eyes. The Chief's mind over loaded and he fell to the ground, unconscious.

"_Master Chief? Can you hear me? Master Chief!_"_

A purple light appeared in front of his eyes. It swirled around until it formed into a familiar translucent figure.

"_Cortana? Is that you?"_

The Chief didn't know how he knew the woman's name, but he knew she was important. Or maybe _was_ important.

"_Master Chief? Sir, wake up! You've got to wake up!"_

Cortana's slender figure dissipated and reassembled into a pink helmet.

"Master Chief! Hey guys, he's waking up!" Donut said happily.

Master Chief opened his eyes and saw Donut looking down at him. He slowly sat up and rubbed his head.

"Where am I?" he asked. He picked up his helmet which was lying on a table next to him and put it on.

"We're at Red Base. You scared us back there, sir," Simmons interjected.

"How long have I been out?" the Chief asked.

"Only a few hours, sir," Simmons replied.

"How are Doc and Andy doing?"

"They're doing fine, sir. Andy is in Grif's room watching TV with him. Caboose and the alien baby are outside with Sheila. Doc, Donut and I were making sure you came to."

"Thank you all."

"Don't mention it, sir." Simmons said.

The Chief got up off the medical table.

"That alien baby brought up some memories . . . I'll be fine. It just surprised me. I didn't expect to see one out here." He said. "Doc, Donut, you're dismissed. Simmons, come with me."

"Yes sir," they replied.

Donut went outside with Caboose, the alien and Sheila. Doc decided to tidy up the base.

"Simmons," the Chief said. "It has come to my attention that our droid, Lopez, is missing his entire body. I have ordered a new one with all of the specifications your Sergeant wanted. It just arrived today, I believe, and I need you to go and prepare it. Lopez is undergoing some final modifications. I will bring his head up shortly."

"Yes sir," Simmons replied.

Simmons made his way to the top of the base and found the box in front of the teleporter. The new FedEx shipping method worked

wonderfully. Simmons opened the large box and found that the droid body came in only several parts; the torso, right arm, left arm, right leg and left leg. Simmons began to work on assembling Lopez' new body.

Master Chief entered the hangar of Red Base and walked over to the computer terminal to which Lopez' head was plugged into.

"Lopez," the Chief ordered. "Activate Language Index Override Code."

Mechanical sounds echoed from within Lopez as his newly upgraded speech unit activated. Lopez then spoke out in his usual automated tone.

"Language Index Override Code activated. English language set to default; hello Master Chief Petty Officer Spartan 117. How may I be of assistance?" he said.

"We have a new body ready for you Lopez." The Chief said.

"Really? That is excellent news. I have missed the ability to move so very much," Lopez responded in his monotonous voice.

"Consider it a 'welcome back' present from Red Squad."

"Thank you, sir."

The Chief picked up Lopez' head and made his way to the upper level of the base. When he arrived, he saw that Simmons had finished constructing Lopez' body.

"Wow, Simmons, good work! How'd you do that so quickly?" the Chief asked.

"Well, sir, I'm part machine myself. It's a lot easier to build stuff with all the robotic protocols telling you what goes where." Simmons replied.

"Well, good job. Ok, Lopez, you ready?" the Chief asked.

"Affirmative" Lopez replied.

The Chief stuck Lopez' head on the newly constructed body. It was the same brown color as his previous body, but there were new red stripes on his arms and legs. Donut had painted a red stripe on his head. After a series of clicks and buzzing noises, Lopez snapped a crisp salute.

"Red Army Blood Gulch Outpost Alpha Droid Number Zero, Zero One, reporting for duty," Lopez said.

"Lopez, your first assignment is to disassemble the inactive tank in the hangar. Take whatever parts you can and add them to Sheila. We'll be going away in a few days, and we need her to take care of the base while we're gone," Master Chief explained.

"Roger that, sir," Lopez said. And with that, he was off.

"Sir," Simmons said. "There was also another box from Red Command. It says it's for Caboose. Is that his new red armor?"

"Yes it is. I though it would have arrived by now, but I guess later is better than never," the Chief replied.

The Chief opened a private comm. channel to Caboose.

"Private Caboose, please report to the top of the base immediately. And bring the alien with you," he said.

"Yes sir, Pastor Leaf, sir," Caboose replied.

"It's Master Chief, Caboose, Master Chief."

The Chief opened another channel to Donut.

"Private Donut, I need you to get Andy and Doc up on top of the base. And bring that can of red paint with you," he said

"Okey dokey, sir!" Donut responded.

In a matter of minutes, Andy, Doc, Caboose and the alien had assembled on top of the base. Simmons, Lopez and Donut stood next to the Chief along with Grif, who claimed there was nothing good on TV.

"Since you have all decided to join us, I am hereby making all of you temporary members of Red Army's Blood Gulch Outpost Alpha." The Chief announced.

He turned to Donut and nodded. Donut walked up to Caboose and pointed behind him here a suit of brand new red armor with blue patches on the arms, legs and head. Caboose cheered happily and ran over to the new armor to change. Donut then moved over to Andy and knelt down. In only seconds, the blue bars that encircled his casing were now red. Donut then moved over to the alien baby and painted red areas on different locations of his teal organic armor. The alien honked with happiness. Donut then moved over to Doc and painted red stripes on his arms, legs and head of his purple armor. The Master Chief walked over to Caboose who had just finished putting his new armor on.

"Michael J. Caboose, you are hereby given the rank of Private of the Red Army." He said. Master Chief saluted Caboose, who returned the gesture.

The Chief moved over to Andy.

"Andy, you are hereby given the designation of Official Assault Bomb of the Red Army." The Master Chief saluted Andy, who was unable to make any sort of motion.

Master Chief moved over to the alien and stopped. The alien had no name, and it looked at him with curiosity. Several ideas popped into the Chief's mind.

"Lock-jaw," the Chief decided. It was better than nothing. "You are hereby given the rank of Official Stealth Operative and Alien Ambassador of the Red Army." Lock-jaw honked with admiration as the

Chief saluted him.

"Medical Officer Dufresne, you are hereby given the rank of Official Medical Officer of the Red Army." The Master Chief saluted him, and Doc saluted back.

The Chief turned and walked over to the other three red soldiers and nodded. They snapped to attention and saluted the newly ordained Red Army Operatives. The new Red Operatives who could return the salute did. Lock-jaw mimicked the motion. The Master Chief smiled. In one day, their numbers of soldiers had doubled. Their mission would succeed. Master Chief's missions always succeeded.

"Ok everyone, Phase Two of Operation: Red Rage is still active. Let's make the best of it!" he said.

The other nine members of Red Squad cheered and left. Caboose and Lock-jaw went out to play on the rocks. Lopez picked up Andy and they walked over to Sheila to talk about mechanical business. Grif and Simmons went back inside to watch TV. Donut and Doc went into the kitchen to get the celebratory dinner party started. Master Chief looked around. This was going to be a very interesting week.

To Be Continued

8. Preparation

Chapter VIII

_After discovering that Doc, Andy and Tucker's alien baby had been abandoned at Blue Base, Master Chief decided to make them temporary members of the Red Army. Almost a week has passed. The new Reds have adjusted to life at the Red Base and Phase Two of Operation: Red Rage was coming to a close . . . _

Master Chief stood on top of Red Base watching the sun set on the horizon. The light from the setting star cast shadows across the whole canyon until, slowly, it was completely dark and the stars shone down from the heavens. Crickets began their nightly chorus of chirps and were soon joined by a myriad of other nocturnal creatures and their voices. The last week had been exactly what the Master Chief needed; a break. He had been able to relax and clear his mind with ease. The former Blues had no trouble adjusting to life at the Red Base. Doc and Donut got along just fine and talked about all sorts of things from medical science to interior design. Andy had made friends with Grif and Simmons, who watched TV with him and helped with his diet, respectively. Lock-jaw, who was now the same height as his alien parent, followed Master Chief like a bipedal loyal hound. He had also explained the rest of his made-up story to Caboose, who had bought every last word about him being an ex-spy and having no memory of his life beforehand. Master Chief no longer called Caboose Gamma-twelve because he decided it was unnecessary.

The Master Chief took a deep breath and, followed closely by Lock-jaw, departed from his spot and made his way down to the hangar where Caboose and Lopez had announced that they were finished modifying Sheila. The Chief entered the hangar and saw a massive sheet draped over what would have to be Sheila, although it appeared

much too large.

"Lopez, Caboose, you have something to show me?" the Chief said. The two looked at the Chief, at each other, then at the sheet. Lopez nodded at Caboose who walked forward and cleared his throat.

"Casper Weed," he began.

"Master Chief, Caboose, Master Chief," the Chief corrected.

"We have finished fixing Sheila. She is bigger, more powerfuller and scarier than ever." Caboose turned to Lopez. "Was that right? Did I say it right?"

"Close enough," Lopez said. "Behold, Sheila, version two point zero! The M808C Main Assault Tank!"

Lopez yanked the sheet off of Sheila and the Chief took an involuntary step back.

"What in the _world?_" the Chief was in awe.

Sheila had been given such an extreme make-over the Chief wouldn't have known it was her if he didn't already know. Her front treads now sported their own individual machine gun turret and were covered in spikes. The front of her body had a triple-barrel plasma cannon mounted on it. There were spikes along that surface too. The driver canopy was gone. In its place was a rocket panel that held six individual rocket launchers, three on top, three on the bottom. The turret had changed drastically as well. There were now two main cannons attached to the rotating turret and there were also two smaller machine gun turrets instead of one. On the right side of the rotating base was another rocket panel with the same setup as the first one. The left side sported a plasma weapon that the Chief had never seen before. On top of the turret base was another weapon the Chief had never seen before and it was _massive_. It had a large cannon-like barrel and extended behind the tank for five feet. It was attached to the rear of the tank and several cords ran from it into where the driver canopy used to be.

"You two are incredible. Tell me, what is that plasma weapon on the side?" he asked.

"This is a weapon of my own design," replied Lopez. "It uses a high powered focusing lens to magnify the power of a regular plasma laser. It is capable of independently tracking a target in a one hundred and eighty degree angle."

"And the weapon on the top?"

"That was Private Caboose's idea. It was taken from the original Magnetic Accelerator Cannon used on the Gauss Warthog and was amplified five times its normal size and strength. A single round can shatter a boulder."

"Caboose's idea?"

"He wanted something that went 'boom'."

"I see. So, she is ready for her assignment

then?"

"Affirmative."

"Excellent. I will be on top of the base if you need anything."

The Chief turned to leave and Lock-jaw followed. He returned to his spot on top of the base. Lock-jaw walked over to his corner and fell asleep. After several minutes, the Chief heard mechanical footsteps coming up the ramp to his left. He turned to see Lopez, who had come to give him an update.

"I trust everything is going well?" the Chief inquired.

"Yes, everything is going well. Sheila is downloading her mission objectives from the computer and Caboose went inside to watch The Notebook with Donut, Simmons, Andy and Doc."

"Good work Lopez. You should be proud of yourself, you and Caboose. The work you did on Sheila is truly incredible."

"Thank you, sir. I also have a message from Red Command. The Blue soldiers known as Tucker and Church have left their previous location. They are currently moving to an unknown location in response to a message sent to them from an unknown sender. The last recorded location was a construction site in the southern hemisphere of the planet. The small land formation that is our next destination is on the way there."

"Understood. Tell Command that we will have departed by noon tomorrow."

"Yes sir."

Lopez turned and left. Master Chief departed the other way. Lock-jaw awakened and followed the Master Chief into the base. They passed Grif's room, which also doubled as the team's den. A large, high-definition, flat-screentelevision hung from the wall and a couch sat several feet back from it. On the couch, Donut, Doc, Simmons and Andy were crying because someone in the movie died or something to that effect. Caboose was watching and pretending to know what was happening. The Chief made his way to the kitchen where Grif was eating a box of cookie dough ice cream.

"Hey," he said casually.

Master Chief had come to accept the fact that only Simmons and Donut would ever greet him as 'sir'. It no longer bothered him, since he was used to the informal manner now.

"Hello Grif. I take it the ladies kicked you out so they could watch their movie?"

"Yeah," Grif said between spoonfuls of ice cream. "I saw it already. It sucks."

Master Chief turned and patted Lock-jaw on the head. Lock-jaw then went into the corner, curled up in his blanket and fell asleep.

"I take it you packed for the hike tomorrow, right?"

"We're hiking? Why? That stupid valley is over a hundred miles away! We should take a ship or something!"

"A ship would attract unwanted attention. Besides, you need to get in shape. Have you seen how much weight Andy lost already?"

"Yeah, he'll be real good at exploding when he's the size of your thumb. Look, I wasn't too excited about this mission to begin with; getting the Sarge back and all, but now you want me to hike for over a hundred miles? That's insane, sir."

"Suck it up, Private. We'll be out of this canyon before noon tomorrow. Get some rest, you're gonna need it."

The Chief walked back to his room. The floor, walls and ceiling were spotless thanks to Donut's intense cleaning methods. Master Chief's camo-pattern blanket was tucked neatly around his cot. The Chief turned off the light and crawled into his bed. He was tired from a long day of preparation and he would need energy for the journey ahead. The Chief removed his helmet and placed it on the floor. Then he rested his head against his pillow. After a few seconds, he was fast asleep.

To Be Continued

9. Battle Creek

Chapter IX

_Phase Two of Operation: Red Rage had officially ended and Phase Three was immediatley placed into effect. Master Chief and the other nine members of Red Squad were about to start their trek towards the mysterious place dubbed Battle Creek . . . _

Master Chief and Lopez walked into the hangar of Blue Base. Simmons had discovered a somewhat gradual incline behind the Blue Base that would be easiest to scale. It was still ridiculously steep, but it wasn't completely vertical like other parts of the wall. Master Chief had agreed to the plan and the red team had made a short trip overto the Blue Basewith all the gear. While everyone else was preparing for the journey to Battle Creek, Master Chief had decided to activate Sheila so she could begin her patrol of the canyon until they returned. _If_ they returned . . .

The Chief and Lopez approached Sheila's deactivated body.

"Activate," the Chief ordered.

A red light, courtesy of Simmons, blinked on. The turret lifted up from its resting position and assumed the role of the tank's eye. It looked from the Master Chief to Lopez and back to the Chief.

"Thank you for activating the M808C Main Assault Tank," a masculine voice announced from the tank's external speakers. "You may call me Shawn."

"What? Shawn? Why not Sheila? And why is your voice different?"

"In the event of unauthorized upgrades being added to my arsenal, said tank converts gender programming from feminine to masculine."

"Why?" the Chief asked.

"You got me, sir," Shawn replied. "I guess it's for appearance. I mean, I'm not saying one couldn't, but when's the last time you saw a chick decked down with armaments like these?"

"I don't know, Shawn, I've seen ladies with some pretty impressive 'cannons' in my day," the Chief said. "Anyway, I believe you have already downloaded your assignment from the main computer?"

"Yup."

"Good. We need this place secure from any invading Blue forces while we're gone. According to Simmons, Sheila suffered memory damage during the years she was alone here because some of her memory banks failed. You have three sets of back up memory banks, so you should remember us even if we're blasted three thousand years into the future. Anyway, you are free to do whatever you want while we're gone. I already informed Red Command of our mission, but should they send any troops to this location in our absence, you are not permitted to divulge them with any information regarding your actual purpose or us. Are we clear?"

"Yes sir."

"Then good luck Shie- I mean Shawn. We'll come back when this is all sorted out."

"Ha, yeah right. With your luck, I'll end up bailing you out of trouble sooner or later."

"I wouldn't bet your third cannon on it."

Lopez and the Chief saluted Shawn and left the hangar. The two walked over to the starting point of their journey. All of them had their gear safely stowed away on their backs except for Grif, who had stowed his gear inside Lopez. Caboose, as per request, was holding the Blue flag. Master Chief had the Red flag. Lock-jaw was carrying Andy. Everyone was looking at the Chief, waiting for the signal to move out. The Chief moved toward the front of the squad. His squad.

"Alright ladies, gentlemen, aliens and machines, we're heading out. We don't know what's waiting for us on our way to Battle Creek. We do know, however, what's waiting for us when we get there. And that's about forty religious zealots waiting to tear us limb from limb in order to protect their precious flags. When we get there, we will attempt to establish a temporary alliance with the Red forces. If we fail, then we'll burn them and their flags to ashes! Then we'll burn the ashes! Now let's move out!"

The Chief turned and marched up towards the rock wall. He began his precarious climb up the unstable canyon followed by the rest of the squad. Lock-jaw tore past his teammates and ran up the slope not even

using his hands. He hopped from one outcropping to the next until he reached the top. Lopez followed in a similar hasty manner. Using his robotic strength, he made his own footholds by punching the rock wall. He reached the top mere seconds after Lock-jaw. They both looked down to watch his friends continue their climb. After half an hour, Master Chief grabbed Caboose's hand and hauled him up over the ledge. All of them had successfully made it. After a short break to let everyone catch their breath, Master Chief began to move out again, Lock-jaw at his side.

The march went on for a week, with the team pitching camp at various places across the planet. There were no encounters with wild beasts or savage natives, so the squad was able to relax and even enjoy the trek.

The squad came to a halt one night and pitched camp, just like they did every night. While everyone was busy setting up camp, Lopez and Lock-jaw were sent on reconnaissance, also following routine. Master Chief had just finished setting up his tent when Lopez came in over the radio.

"Master Chief, Lock-jaw and I have discovered a strange land formation. You may want to come examine it," he said.

"Roger that, Lopez, I'm on my way," the Chief replied. He turned to regard the rest of the squad. "I'm going to check out something Lopez found. I'll be back in a few."

Everyone gave their sign of acknowledgement; a grunt, a wave, a thumbs-up sign or a salute was tossed in the Chief's general direction. He departed from the camp and found Lopez and Lock-jaw fifty meters away. They were looking down into a massive hole in the ground.

"What is it?" the Chief asked.

"It appears to be an unnatural formation," Lopez replied. "My sensors are picking up seismic activity from within the hole."

Lopez' sensors were correct; at a seven second interval a resonating _thud_ would echo through the chasm beneath.

"I wish we had time to check this out," the Chief said. "I'll leave a tracking device here so Red Command can scan it thoroughly and tell us what's down there."

The Chief reached into a pouch on his belt and retrieved a small, triangular device with a red emitter in the center. He set it down next to the hole and waited to make sure it embedded itself into the ground. Satisfied that it wouldn't be shaken loose from the vibrations coming from the crater, the Chief led Lopez and Lock-jaw back to the camp. Master Chief explained what was found to the rest of the squad before they retired to their tents.

The next day, the squad continued their journey towards Battle Creek. Donut would constantly try to get everyone to join in on a game of Eye Spy, but it always died shortly after it was started. Grif was constantly complaining about the intense heat, even though the MJOLNIR armor automatically compensated for any change in temperature. Andy would occasionally tell a knock-knock joke, but

everyone had already heard every knock-knock joke there was to tell, so that never caught on. Caboose would, from time to time, ramble on about something he did during his quest with Andy, Tucker and CrunchBite, but would lose focus after about three minutes.

Things went on like this for another week until Lock-jaw suddenly dropped Andy and sprinted past the rest of the squad.

"Hey! What the hell do you think you're doing?" Andy shouted. "Get back here and carry me you moron!"

Lock-jaw answered with a series of honks and blargs.

"What is he saying, Andy?" the Chief asked.

"He keeps yelling 'we're here, we're here', but I don't know what he . . . oh, well now that makes sense."

The Master Chief jogged ahead of the group and caught up with Lock-jaw, who was panting eagerly like a puppy that had just seen a large chew toy. The Chief looked down into the valley below. Sure enough, they had arrived. A Red Fortress sat on one side of the stream and a Blue Fortress sat directly opposite. Both appeared to challenge the other to send troops to try and take its flag.

Lopez walked up to the two carrying Andy. The rest of the Squad followed.

"Here we are, men, Battle Creek. Load your weapons, we're going in."

To be continued

10. The Deal

Chapter X

_After spending two weeks trekking across the surface of the planet and discovering a strange unnatural land formation which was marked for later observation, Master Chief and Red Squad finally arrived at Battle Creek . . . _

Master Chief had decided to wait until nightfall to descend into the pit. The team had been mentally preparing for the possibility of a life or death battle. When dusk had arrived, Master Chief sent Lock-jaw into Battle Creek to scout the Red Fortress and report on the defenses. Lock-jaw, who had received a light-bending camouflage unit attached to his organic armor, activated the unit and disappeared from sight. Master Chief finished readying his Battle Rifle and looked over his squad. Grif had finished adjusting his sniper rifle, Donut and Simmons were inspecting each other's Sub Machine Guns, Caboose was fiddling with his M6D Magnum handgun and Lopez was practicing aiming a strange, blue plasma weapon.

The Chief walked over to Lopez to ask about the device.

"Hey, what is tha-"

Master Chief stopped mid-sentence as the weapon came into better

view. Images of aliens that the Chief had decided were Elites, the ones that looked like Lock-jaw, firing identical weapons flashed in his mind. More images of himself using such weapons, even two at the same time appeared. Then, stranger still, images of primate-like aliens firing a red variation of the weapon entered his mind as well. The flood of memories stopped and the Chief regained his composure. Lopez was looking at him with his head tilted to the side.

"Are you alright, sir?" he asked.

"I'm fine. I just . . . thought I left the stove on at the base for a second."

"I made sure it was off before we left, sir," Lopez reassured him.

"Oh, thank you. Now, what is that weapon you have there?"

"This is a weapon designed by O'Malley. It fires bolts of plasma at an accelerated rate. After continuous fire, the weapon overheats and shuts down automatically to cool off."

"Interesting. Very . . . interesting." the Chief said. He turned and walked to the cliff edge.

Master Chief had been having dreams that played similar images in his mind. He assumed they were memories, since he was in all of them. They depicted events ranging from battles on a strange alien ring world to battles on a planet called Earth. There was an Earth where he was at presently, but it wasn't the same Earth that appeared in his dreams. In all of these visions, there was always a feeling of impending doom that overshadowed him before he awoke, like an enemy that couldn't be stopped. Some of the dreams showed him the purple holographic woman, Cortana. He didn't know the connection he had with the woman, but he knew she was important to him in his past. The dreams had become less frequent, and for that the Master Chief was thankful. He was able to focus on his mission and devote his full attention to the matters at hand.

As the Chief was contemplating what the next course of action would bring, Lock-jaw appeared next to him. The Chief looked down at the alien and smiled to himself. Lock-jaw was already holding Andy and was ready to give his report.

"Alright, Lock-jaw, how are the defenses around the Fortress?"

Lock-jaw honked and blarged his reply. Andy translated as he reported.

"He says there are no defenses around the base. The only defenses in the base are the Red soldiers." Andy translated. "He says that a Red soldier was reading off info from a sensor node, but he was reading the information all weird. The Red guy said that 'nomads have traveled here from the North', He guesses that's us, and that 'they bear the markings of our God', which he guesses is referring to the red stripes on our armor. He says that the Red guy said 'they have come to liberate us from the bondage of the infidels', which is probably referring to us wiping out all the Blues."

"Well, I don't see any sensory equipment. If it is housed in their base, it must be incredibly powerful if it was able to pick out the red markings on our armor," the Chief said.

Lock-jaw began honking and blarging again and Andy translated.

"He says that the sensor node has no visual receptors. Instead it has a special function to locate the colors red and blue. Other than that, the only information they have on outsiders is that they exist."

"How very odd," the Chief commented. He turned to the rest of the team. "Alright, Doc, you stay up here with Grif and Caboose and tell me if you see any activity. The rest of you, follow me."

Doc, Grif and Caboose remained on top of the cliff while the rest of the squad hopped down onto the strange rock formation that formed a quarter of a circle. They slowly made their way down the formation and walked up to the Red Fortress. A lone red soldier was guarding the entrance.

"Halt! Who goes there!" the grunt replied in a high-pitched squeaky voice.

"I am the Master Chief, leader of the Red forces at Red Army Blood Gulch Outpost Alpha," the Chief announced. "Requesting permission to enter."

"Have you come to seek the wisdom of the Flag? Are you here to marvel at its incredible flappiness? Were you drawn by its divine power? Or are you here to desecrate this holy ground with Blue evil?" the grunt asked.

". . . The first one," the Chief answered.

"Oh, ok," the Grunt stepped aside and allowed Red Squad to enter. Master Chief allowed the others to pass him. He then opened a private Channel to Grif.

"Grif, this is the Master Chief. We have gained access to the Red Fortress. Keep your eyes peeled for any Blue activity."

"Whatever," Grif answered.

Master Chief followed the others to the rear room where the Red Zealots had erected a shrine honoring the Flag, which sat atop the altar, flapping in the slight breeze. A Red Zealot stepped out from beneath the altar. He had gold stripes painted on his arms, legs and helmet. He appeared to be a Prophet of some sort.

"I have foreseen your arrival. Come, we have prepared a banquet in honor of your presence," the Red Prophet said.

"What of the Blue forces? Shouldn't we be prepared in case they attack?" the Master Chief asked.

The word 'blue' made the Prophet shudder, but he brushed aside the outsider's ignorance.

"The Blues do not attack us at night, nor do we attack them. We are

able to rest at night, and prepare ourselves for the battles that are fought during the day."

The Chief nodded and opened the private channel to Grif again. "Change of plans," the Chief said. "Nobody attacks at night, so you guys can come down here. They have a feast set up for us. Make sure you leave the emergency equipment up there along with the flags. no telling how these nuts would react if they saw a double of their 'God' floating around."

"Sure thing, Chief. We'll be down in a sec," Grif responded happily. Master Chief closed the channel and turned to the Prophet. "More of my squad is coming to join us. They were protecting the Fortress from a possible attack, but since we are safe from hostilities, they have decided to form up with the rest of my squad."

"Good, good, the more the merrier!" the Prophet said happily.

In a matter of minutes, Grif, Caboose and Doc had arrived and all were seated at a massive table, the Red flag was placed in the center of the table for all to see.

"So," the Prophet said while devouring the leg of a giant bird, "I must inquire as to why you are here. The last visitors we had brought the Anti-Flag to these lands, so we are always cautious about new guests." The Chief had noticed. There were at least two guards stationed at every door. From what he could see, the Chief assumed that all who were eating with them were either high-ranking soldiers or religious men. The lowest soldiers were probably not permitted to join in such events.

"I'll be frank with you," the Chief said. "We need your help."

"We would be happy to provide you with shelter for as long as you need to stay," the Prophet offered.

"Not that kind of help. We require your assistance destroying an evil Artificial Intelligence system known as O'Malley."

The Prophet stopped chewing his food and slowly set his fork and knife down. All of the Red Zealots sitting at the table looked at one another with fear, dread and horror etched into their faces. The guards at the door quickly began glancing around the room, as if O'Malley would appear out of thin air and slay them all.

"Master Chief, we have shown you nothing but kindness during your stay. What would possess you to speak such heresies so blatantly?" the Prophet inquired. His tone suggested that he was more curious than angry, unlike the rest of the Zealots seated at the table.

"O'Malley has taken over the Sergeant at Blood Gulch Outpost Alpha. We need to get him back," the Chief said.

"While I offer my sincerest apologies for your most unfortunate loss, I simply cannot send my men to fight the Demon. You see, when the Flag brought us to this place, neither the Reds nor the Blues could find our Flags. We allied ourselves with them, if only to have them help us find our God. We thought we had found something that would lead us to the Flag at our Frozen Fortress, but before we could

examine it, the Demon arrived with his white minion. At that point, we thought he was a savior, one who would lead us to our Flag. He defeated the black warrior and his minion took her away. The Demon then led us here, where he filled our heads with terrible thoughts of betrayal. The Reds turned on the Blues, and our peace was shattered. The Demon slayed us all and left. Now, after only several months of freedom, you ask us to go with you to find the Demon? I cannot agree to such a suicidal attempt; it is one I am not willing to risk."

"I'm not asking you to do this out of the kindness of your heart. I am willing to repay the favor."

"And how do you plan to do that, hmm?"

"If you help us stop O'Malley, we'll kill every single Blue in this entire valley."

"You wouldn't be the first. The Blues practice a religion similar to ours. Their Flag gives them the power to rise from the dead, like ours does. Killing all of them would be exactly that; killing all of them. I understand the rest of the galaxy lives without such power, but it exists here. Killing them does nothing."

"Maybe not, but destroying their flag would."

"You . . . I hope you're serious," the Prophet nearly choked on his food. "What you speak is blasphemy. The Blue's Flag and Our Flag have been rivals since their creation. Destroying it is not as simple as killing its followers."

"Trust me. I can destroy that flag and I will. If I succeed, will you agree to assist me?"

"I will send all able bodied troops to fight under your command, including myself, if you destroyed the Blue Flag. We would be forever indebted to you."

"It's settled then. Tomorrow, we attack the Blues, kill every last one of them, and destroy their flag, ending the Blue tyranny once and for all!"

Every Zealot in the room roared with approval. The Chief smiled. The speech had been a little out of character, but it was necessary if he was to gain the support of these Zealots. Tomorrow would prove to be an interesting day indeed.

To Be Continued.

11. Battle for Battle Creek

Chapter XI

_Master Chief and Red Squad had finally reached their destination: Battle Creek. After promising to wipe out the Blue forces, Red Squad made plans for their victory. The next day, they put their plan into action . . . _

Master Chief crept silently along the side of the Red Fortress

accompanied by Red Squad and ten of the Red Zealots. He stopped and held up his fist, causing everyone else to freeze. The Chief opened a private channel to Simmons.

"Red Two, move into position," he said.

"Roger that," Simmons replied.

Simmons, Grif and Lock-jaw, who was carrying Andy, ran through the stream and up to the side of the Blue Fortress where a section of a wall had been taken down. The three soldiers climbed up the wreckage and reached the top of the Fortress. Simmons waved to the Chief signaling that they were in position. The Chief then opened a channel to Donut.

"Red Three, move your squad into position."

"You got it, sir."

Donut, Lopez and Caboose ran to the strange rock formation that jutted out from the side of the cliff wall. The squad began their ascent up the formation until they were at the top. Lopez entered a small cave-like formation in the wall to hold off any Blue forces that tried to flank the position. Donut turned to the Chief and gave the thumbs-up signal. The Chief turned to the Zealots who were behind him.

"As soon as that trumpet finishes sounding off, open fire on that main entrance, understand?"

"Sir, yes sir!" they all said in unison.

No sooner had the Chief given this instruction, the disembodied tone from the trumpet blared through the small valley. As soon as it ended, all eleven soldiers of Red One's squad opened fire with weapons ranging from plasma pistols to rocket launchers. The five Blue soldiers who had decided to use that door didn't know what hit them. Ten more Blues exited the Fortress from the underground tunnel on the side of the base and ten more exited from a similar tunnel in front of the base.

"Now!" the Chief shouted. The remaining fifteen Red Zealots popped up from their hiding places, shouting their own individual battle cries and poured fire on the unsuspecting Blue forces. They didn't fall easily, as most of them ran for cover behind walls or rocks, cursing the Reds for their camping tactics. The Chief saw that Donut and his squad were contributing to the effort by showering the Blues with sniper fire. The Chief turned to his squad of Zealots who were firing on the Blues.

"Alright, Red Four, you know what to do!" he shouted above the gunfire.

"Yes sir!" the grunt replied. His high-pitched squeaky voice was filled with anticipation and excitement.

The Zealot, along with four others, charged the Blue's front line of defense as planned, screaming at the top of their lungs. One of the Blue's fired a rocket at a Red soldier two feet away from him. The explosion took out Red Four, his Grunts and the five Blues that had

established a perimeter around the tunnel in the front. That wasn't planned, but the Chief liked it anyway. The Chief charged at the opening followed by the remaining four Zealots that were with him. A Blue soldier stepped in front of the tunnel and tried to halt their advance. He was given a shotgun blast to the face. Master Chief and his Zealots successfully entered the tunnel and the Chief shot an access panel on the wall, causing the door to the tunnel to seal shut.

"Red Two, my team and I are in the Fortress and we are securing your exit vector. Be ready to initiate your part of the plan on my signal." He said.

"Ok, but hurry up, sir. The Blues found our location and are trying to take us out," Simmons replied.

"Roger that, Red Two." The Chief switched off his radio.

He nodded and two Red Zealots went to secure the side tunnel exit. The remaining two followed the Chief through a small tunnel. It opened into a small landing with a ramp leading up to the main level of the Fortress on the right and the left. Master Chief decided to take the left one. They crept up the incline slowly until Master Chief made the signal to stop. He peered around the corner and saw two Blue soldiers guarding an altar. The flag was, undoubtedly, on the top. The Chief turned to the two Zealots with him. He opened a private channel to the one farthest away from him.

"Soldier, I need you to peek around the corner behind you and tell me how many Blues you see," the Chief ordered. He opened another Channel to the other Zealot. "Give him cover."

The grunts nodded and quickly slid into position. The one glanced down the hallway and held up two fingers. The Chief decided that there were probably more that he couldn't see and he wasn't going to risk charging them since they were most likely the best Blue soldiers in the area.

"On my mark, toss a grenade down the hall into the Blue's Temple. One, two, three, now!"

The Chief and the Red grunt both tossed a grenade into the Blue Temple. Master Chief's grenade rolled to a stop at the foot of a Blue Zealot. He looked down at it before it exploded, sending his body into the wall behind him. With their cover blown the Chief darted from his hiding place and into the Temple. He saw that his Zealots were already there, firing their weapons at Blue Soldiers who had taken cover behind the altar. The Chief opened the channel to Simmons as he blew open a hole in another Blue's chest.

"Red Two, the Temple is ready for bombardment."

Rather than a reply, the glass above the roof of the temple shattered and fell to the floor below. Shards of glass penetrated the armor of two of the four Blue Temple Guards and cut into vital organs. The Guards fell to the ground in pain. Fortunately, the Red Zealots were out of the deadly glass's range and were unharmed. They continued to fire on the remaining Blue Guards, shouting and taunting their foes. The Master Chief was also firing when three grenades fell from the hole in the roof and down into the Temple below. The Chief and

the Red Zealots dove for cover as the explosives detonated, killing the last two Guards. Lock-jaw jumped into the base and placed Andy under the altar. Grif and Simmons followed.

"I'll explode in twenty seconds, Chief. Better get going," Andy said.

A timer blinked on his digital display and began to count down. The Chief and his allies ran through the base and reached the exit to the underground tunnel. _Fifteen. _The two Zealots that were stationed there were dead as a result of continuous fire. The Chief made sure the surrounding area was secure and then motioned his troops to file through. _Twelve. _He looked back down the hall and saw several Blue soldiers running to catch up with them, but the Chief had other ideas. He ran and leapt into the air with his right foot outstretched. His boot connected with the lead Blue's chest, sending him backwards into his fellow soldiers. The Chief exited through the tunnel and joined his soldiers. He took out an M6D handgun and fired a round at the panel on the wall inside the tunnel, causing the door to close just as the Blue Soldiers caught up with them. They were trapped inside. _Six. _The Chief ran away from the Fortress as fast as he could and sprinted to the back of the Red Base, followed by his Zealots, Grif Simmons and Lock-jaw. A teleporter had been constructed that would take them directly behind the Blue Base. The Chief saw that all of his men were alive and unharmed and they were waiting with the three surviving Red Zealots. _Three . . . two . . . one._

Andy exploded, sending a shockwave throughout the small valley. The explosion tore a massive hole in the back of the Blue Fortress. Fire ran through the halls of the base at incredible speeds catching any Blue unfortunate enough to be inside. The fire was repelled by the closed hatches that sealed the tunnels off from the outside world. Pressure built up to such an extent that the doors were blown off their tracks and were sent miles into the air trailing smoke and fire behind them. Fire also shot out of any window or crack in the wall. The inferno reached the armory and a secondary explosion rippled through the area as the fire made contact with explosive material and ammunition. The explosions subsided after several minutes.

Master Chief took a deep breath and stepped through the teleporter. He was instantly transported through the void in time and space to the newly destroyed Blue Fortress. He took several steps forward and turned to look at the destruction. The Temple room had been completely decimated and what remained of the base was scorched black. Pieces of debris fell from the sky, smoldering from the explosion. The Chief looked down at his feet and saw Andy lying next to the Blue Flag.

"So be honest. How'd I do?" Andy asked. He was eager to hear a progress report on his abilities.

"Andy," the Chief began. "If there is anything in the entire universe that can explode with more ferocity than you, I have yet to see it."

"Wow. Thanks sir. Glad to hear it."

The Chief bent down and picked up the Flag in one hand and Andy in the other. He went back through the teleporter and arrived back

behind the Red Fortress. He was greeted with cheers and applause from everyone there. The Red Prophet came up to him accompanied by two bodyguards holding what appeared to be the Blue leader.

"You monster," the Blue said with disgust upon seeing the Chief holding the Blue Flag. "You will burn in the fires of Hell for this atrocity!"

The Chief turned to the Red Prophet.

"He is the Shaman of the Blue Tribe," the Red Prophet explained. "If all the members of a team are killed, the flags sound their Holy Horns and the armies of both sides are resurrected. We decided it would be appropriate for the Blue heretic to witness his God's demise firsthand."

"Very well." The Chief said.

He thought it was logical to keep at least one Blue alive, no matter how savage and sadistic the purposes were. He normally would have objected to such a form of torture, but it was not his place to question such motives. The Chief turned to Caboose.

"Private Caboose, would you like to do the honors?" he asked.

Whispers and murmurs passed through the Red Team's ranks. Apparently, they remembered Caboose from the last time he was here. The Blue Shaman began laughing.

"You would go so far as to ally yourself with the sworn enemy of our Lords?" He said.

"Relax, Prophet," the Master Chief said to the Red Leader who appeared like he was about to have a heart-attack. "Caboose now fights for the Red Flag. He has sought its infinite wisdom and has seen the true path to salvation. Isn't that right, Caboose?"

"Absolutely, Blacker Cheek, sir. I spotted its minion and saw the true bath of salvation. It was very bubbly." Caboose said.

The Prophet smiled and returned his gaze to the Blue Shaman, who looked on in horror as Master Chief handed the Blue Flag to Caboose. Caboose began to bend the flagpole, but it was stronger than it appeared. He tried again, now putting his full effort into the process. The flag groaned its protest as the metal slowly began to bend from the strain. Caboose began groaning from the pressure he had to apply. His temples were bulging and sweat was running down his face, but nobody could see that. Suddenly, the Blue Flag snapped in two sending small metal shards flying upwards. They harmlessly fell to the ground. Caboose handed the two halves of the flagpole to the Master Chief, who pulled a small blue nano-chip from one of the halves. None of the Red Zealots saw it, as their eyes were focused on Caboose. The Red Prophet looked on in awe. Such a task had not been though possible to accomplish, and the outsiders had done it in less than twenty four hours. He turned to the Blue Shaman, who had dropped to the ground, gripping his head in pain. He looked up at the Red Prophet who was smiling behind his visor.

"Where is your God now?" he said triumphantly.

The Master Chief snapped the nano-chip between his thumb and index finger, causing the Blue Shaman to convulse on the ground. Blue electricity surged through his body and played across his armor like a light show. The Prophet drew an old weapon from his holster; an M6C pistol. He aimed at the Blue leader's head and fired a single round. The slug penetrated the Shaman's visor and skull. The round exited through the back of his head splattering blood, hydrostatic gel and brain matter on the ground. After several moments of silence, the trumpets sounded again and all the Red soldiers woke from where they were seemingly killed. They looked at the Blue corpses on the ground and began cheering. The Blues had been defeated. Permanently. The Chief looked at his squad, all of whom were cheering along with the Zealots. The plan had gone off without a hitch, and they had future allies for the battles ahead. Now, it was time to relax again. The battle had been won, and there was still planning to do. The Master Chief smiled to himself. He had won. Again.

To Be Continued

12. Surprises

Chapter XII

_After the Red Squad defeated the Blues and destroyed their Flag at Battle Creek with the aid of the Red Zealots, Red Squad took a short break to recover from the battle. After a week of socializing and relaxation, the Chief had pieced together the next several Phases of Operation: Red Rage. Everyone was at peace, but evil waited in the shadows ready to strike . . . _

"Do you want my honest opinion, sir?" Simmons asked.

"That's the only opinion I ever want, Simmons," replied the Chief.

Simmons sighed and sat up in his chair.

"It's a long shot, sir, a very long shot. I can have Lopez come in here and calculate the odds if you want. I just don't think it is possible."

"So there is no physically possible way that Caboose could eat fifty gallons of chum and mayonnaise without throwing up?"

"I'm afraid not, sir."

"Well, thanks for that. I almost made a bet that would've cost me a pretty penny. And not just any pretty penny, but _my_ pretty penny."

"It is very pretty, sir."

"Thank you, Simmons. I'm going to see how Doc and Lopez are coming along with the analyzing of the pieces of that nano-chip."

"Sir, was that flagpole a half of a super laser?"

"Yes it was. Wherever there is a Red and a Blue flag, there is the possibility of a super laser being formed. We may have stopped O'Malley from getting his filthy paws on that one, but there are more we haven't found yet, and others he may already have. We'll just have to hope that we can stop him when we get to him."

"I see, sir."

Master Chief got up and left the guest chambers. The main level of the Fortress housed the Temple and the Red Flag. There was a stairwell that led down to a lower level that contained a vast number of rooms ranging from soldier's quarters to the dining hall where Red Squad had eaten during their first night at Battle Creek. There was also a laboratory that housed very advanced research equipment. That was where Doc and Lopez were examining the nano-chip. The Chief entered the room and saw that Lopez was performing a scan of a blood sample from the dead Blue Shaman while Doc took notes based on the data that was displayed on a computer screen.

"Hello men. How goes the research?" the Chief asked. Lopez said nothing and continued with the scan. Doc paused the display screen and waved the Chief over.

"It's going quite well, actually," Doc said. "We made a breakthrough with this flag business that you may be interested in."

"I'm listening."

"Well, you were right about the nano-chip being a supercomputer; it has some strange technology that I wasn't able to identify. Anyway, the nano-chip from the Blue Flag seems to contain a transmitter that sends out strange Electro-Magnetic waves. We also found this inside our friend here."

The Doc motioned to a Petri-dish that was sitting on a table. There were blood stains on it, but in the middle sat a small spherical device. It had a glowing blue light that winked on and off at irregular intervals.

"What is it?" the Chief asked.

"It appears to be a receiver. When the nano-chip sends out the EM waves, the receiver starts vibrating erratically. It sends out its own EM waves, but they're even stranger than the nano-chip's waves. Lopez and I tested it on three rats the Reds found. The results were shocking."

"What happened?"

"We implanted the receiver into the first rat. Lopez made a cut along the side of the rat. The receiver sent some sort of signal to the nano-chip, which caused it to send out the EM waves. The receiver started emitting its own EM waves and the wound healed. We put the receiver in the second rat and Lopez broke its arm. The same thing happened again, but this time, the bone moved itself into the proper position before it healed. We put the receiver in the third rat and Lopez crushed its skull. I hated that part. Anyway, same thing happened, but this time, the rat's skull reformed itself. There were parts of the skull that had been knocked too far away to be assimilated into it, so the bone regenerated! The rat got up and

waked around as if nothing happened!"

"That is incredible. No wonder they worship the flag as a god."

"It appears that the receiver has a bio-monitor that keeps track of its host's health status. When the host is wounded or killed, the receiver sends a message to the nano-chip. The chip sends a signal back to the receiver telling it to heal the host. It is an incredible piece of technology. There's some bad news, though. I'm pretty sure O'Malley already knows this, and is planning on using it somehow. He wasn't too far along in his new evil plot before he left me, so I'm not sure how far along he's gotten. One thing is for sure; he won't be able to do too much research without Lopez or myself. I'm pretty sure that Sarge guy wasn't much of a scientist."

"Yeah," the Chief said. He chuckled a little. "I guess he would have to _steal_ it from you!"

Both of the men shared a laugh at the joke that wasn't all that funny to begin with until the Fortress-spanning comm. system activated.

"_All soldiers report to the Temple immediately. Repeat; all soldiers, report to the temple immediately. Red Squad is welcome as well. That is all._"

The Chief looked at Lopez and the Doc, who got up and followed him out of the laboratory. Doc closed the doors and locked them. The three made their way up to the Temple and were joined by the rest of Red Squad along the way. The Chief let the other members of his team pass him and held Lopez back. Once everyone was gone, the Chief turned to Lopez.

"I know we've been here for a week now, but I still don't trust these guys. They may try to sneak a peek at the data you and Doc collected about the Flag. If they find out the truth about their precious flag, things could get ugly. I need you to stay at the doors to the lab. Don't let anyone except Doc or myself in, understand?"

"Affirmative. I do not trust these fruit loops either. If anyone tries to gain access to the laboratory, I will crush their skulls under my boot."

"Glad to hear it." The Chief turned and left for the Temple while Lopez went to guard the lab.

The Chief met up with the others in the Temple where the Prophet was addressing everyone.

". . . the current whereabouts of this intruder are unknown, but we do know that they have defiled this holy place with bloodshed! This can only be the work of the Blue scum!"

The Chief leaned over to Grif.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"This guy's ranting about an intruder that the sensors picked up," Grif replied. "He whacked one of the patrolmen and he's been yelling about it probably for the last five minutes. I don't see what the big

deal is; the guy got right back up and told the Prophet dude himself."

"And they don't know where he is?"

"Nah, they lost track of him."

The Chief had the sudden urge to be downstairs guarding the lab with Lopez. If there was an intruder around, they could possibly be after the Red Flag, or even the data that Doc had found. The Master Chief didn't believe in jinxing situations, but he now regretted making that joke with Doc about someone stealing the data.

"Tell everyone to be on their guard, and keep your safeties off."

"Ok Chief."

Master Chief moved away from the group that was huddled around the Prophet. He made his way back to the stairwell, but saw that the door was open.

_I thought Lopez closed the door . . . _the Chief suddenly had a very bad feeling. Lopez _did_ close the door. The door's handle had been ripped out of the ancient wood panel. The Chief ran into the lower level and activated a Security Breach Containment Override Code the Prophet had showed him. It silently sealed the Master Chief in the chambers with this 'intruder'. He decided to make a thorough scan of every room starting with the laboratory. The Chief walked down the hallway and rounded the corner, only to find that Lopez was on the floor. Oil seeped through a wound in his armor. He wasn't destroyed, just deactivated. The Chief was glad for that. He then noticed that the laboratory door was ajar. He kicked it open all the way revealing a familiar black-clad figure.

"Hey there, big boy. Miss me?" Tex said.

To Be Continued

13. Rumble Down Under

Chapter XIII

_As Phase Three of Operation: Red Rage came to an end, Doc and Lopez made a startling discovery about the technology housed in the mysterious Red and Blue Flags and the Master Chief made a discovery of his own . . . _

"You . . . I killed you! I watched you die! How are you-"

"_Still_ alive? I guess your indestructible skull is thicker than the metaphor implies."

_Oh, har-dee-har-har. _

"The brain inside that thick skull is what killed you the first time."

"Clueless . . . completely clueless. Let me ask you something; is it

possible that I'm not '_still_' alive? That maybe I just _am
_alive?"

_Which makes no sense at all. _

"That would mean that you would've had to have not died in the first place, which you clearly did. I watched your bio-signs as they flat-lined."

"You're right. The bio-signs did flat-line. The woman you mercilessly annihilated in the Blue Base did die."

If there's one thing I hate more than losing, its riddles.

"Are you saying that you aren't Tex then?"

"Oh, I'm as Tex as Tex will ever be. And I'll prove it to you, right here, right now."

First she's a brand new person, and now she's back from the dead. Women.

"I beat you once, and I can do it again."

"I learned from the mistakes of the one you killed before, Master Chief. I won't be so easily defeated."

And now she's talking in riddles again. Where's Batman when you need him?

"Even if you do kill me, you're not getting out of here. There are about thirty Reds up there, and you defiled their holy place. They'll tear you limb from limb."

"I'll take my chances."

Tex stared at the Master Chief. Master Chief stared back. Then, for the second time in his life, jade clashed with black, and the Chief was locked in a ferocious battle that raged through the lower chambers of the Red Fortress.

* * *

>The Red Prophet hastily followed Doc and Donut to the security room. They arrived to see a group of Zealots and the rest of Red Squad crowded around a security monitoring system. When the Prophet entered, they stepped back to allow him to view what was happening. One of the monitors was displaying an intense battle between the Master Chief and Tex. <p>"This is being recorded from the laboratory?" the Prophet asked.<p>

"Yes sir," answered one of the Security personnel. "He activated the Override Code to the lower chambers, so we can't send any troops to assist him. Only the victor of this battle will be able to open the door."

"Then we must pray that the Master Chief wins,"

At that moment, a chair thrown by Tex was deflected by the Chief's quick arm right into the camera.

"and ask the Flag for strength in our hour of need . . ."

All of the Reds in the base were silent. Below, however, things were quite noisy.

* * *

>The Master Chief blocked several quick strikes from Tex with his forearms. Tex then put her full weight into a punch that the Chief only sidestepped at the last millisecond. The momentum of the missed strike carried her forward. She was about to use the momentum to her advantage when the Chief used it to his. The Chief held his hand out straight and brought it down on Tex's neck like a guillotine. At the same time, his left leg swiped both of Tex's out from under her. She fell flat on her face. The Chief, not being as foolish as to put only one foot on his query again, straddled her back. He grabbed her helmet and yanked it backwards. <p>"You know," Tex said while struggling to resist the Chief's iron grip, "under different, more romantic, circumstances, I might have let you do this."

Ignoring the snide comment, the Chief revealed his combat knife and brought it to Tex's throat.

"Oh, now we're using weapons?" Tex said. There was an element of amusement in her tone. "Kinky."

"I'm not playing games. I remember putting you down last time, and I plan to do it again."

"Oh, really? Remember ****this****?"

Tex, who was surprisingly flexible, arched her back and bent her knees so that her feet clamped onto the Chief's head.

"Son of a biscut."

She swung them back with unexpected force and sent the Chief flailing over several tables, shattering beakers and test tubes and other various lab equipment pieces. He quickly righted himself and stood to face Tex, only to find that she was already on him. She picked him up by his shoulders and threw him into a wall and revealed a concealed blade. She pinned the Chief to the wall with one arm and repetitively stabbed him in the stomach with the other. The Master Chief could feel each individual stab and the pain tore through his body like an explosion as his midsection was being torn to pieces. The Chief grabbed Tex's helmet and crashed their heads together. He was temporarily stunned, but it beat being made into sushi. Pushing the pain aside, the Chief dodged a series of quick blows that left cracks in the rock. The Chief reciprocated by delivering his own quick punches, all of which Tex dodged. The Chief's punches, however, left holes in the rock. Tex had backed up a considerable length from the Chief and began to sprint at him. She leapt into the air, ready to drop-kick him.

_Again? I thought she would have learned the first time . . .

—

Suddenly, the Chief realized that Tex probably did learn from her

first encounter that such a maneuver would result in her own demise. The Chief moved into position, ready to grab the leg that extended towards him. At the last moment, Tex switched legs and the Chief switched positions, predicting the move. He caught the limb, but rather than slam her into a wall, he used the force from her failed attack to spin around in circles. The exertion blurred Tex's vision and she thought she would black out. She would have, if the Chief had not become extremely dizzy. He let go of his foe, launching her across the room like a human hammer toss. Her weakened form crashed into a wall, shattered the rock, bounced off the wall and fell to the floor in a crumpled heap. Tex quickly regained her sight and was able to stand, if not well, and see that the Chief was still suffering from his ordeal. He was on his knees with one hand extended out at his side and the other one clutching his diced-up stomach. Tex walked over to his helpless form, regaining her composure with each step.

"How ironic," Tex laughed, "The Red's greatest warrior, beaten because of something as childish as spinning around in circles."

Tex pulled out her combat knife again. It was the same one her predecessor had tried to slay the Master Chief with which ended up lodged in the back of the woman's neck. Tex would not fail as the previous assailant did. Tex gripped the handle with both hands and brought it up above her head. The Chief appeared to still be in a daze and had managed to get one knee up. Both his hands were out at his sides. Suddenly, his arms snapped up and the Chief used his leg that was planted to the ground to spring back. His elbows bent and the Chief stood on his hands for a split second, the pain in his midsection nearly blinding him and then shot upwards at Tex's head. One of his legs was outstretched and knocked the blade from her hands. The other foot was coiled up like a lethal spring. It shot out and connected with Tex's jaw. The impact was so powerful that the seals on her helmet broke and the helmet itself flew off Tex's head. The helmet bounced off the ceiling and clattered to the ground. The Chief landed behind her and was about to strike the finishing blow when he saw Tex's almost disarmingly beautiful face. He entered what his friend once dubbed 'Spartan-Time' and everything seemed to slow down. Long, black, wavy hair was falling into Tex's face after being released from the helmet. Her sky blue eyes were unfocused, as she was still recovering from the blow. A single tear slowly made its way down her cheek and the Chief felt a pang of guilt for have caused her pain. Her nose was bleeding, but the Chief could see no problem with it otherwise. His eyes drifted to her lips and he noticed how enticing they were. Then he mentally smacked himself in the face and visibly flinched from the 'impact'. The soldier part of his psyche was screaming at him for being so incompetent. His inability to act had given Tex an opportunity to strike, possibly even kill, him. The Chief thought about CPO Mendez from when he was a trainee. He could envision his former instructor chewing him out for such a reaction. Of course, the Spartans were never trained on how to react when dealing with extremely attractive hostiles. These thoughts ran through the Chief's head in less than a second. Time returned to normal as Tex staggered from the kick. The Chief decided that, gorgeous or not, Tex had to be eliminated.

He pushed any thoughts about Tex that weren't synonymous with 'enemy' to the back of his mind. The ruthless soldier resurfaced and he moved in for the kill. Tex looked at the Chief and raised a hand to her face only to find her helmet was gone. She looked from the Chief to

where her helmet lay on the other side of the room. One punch to her unarmored head would be all it took to kill her, and she knew it. She also knew that the Chief was faster than she was, and could kill her if she decided to make for her helmet. Tex decided on the latter. She turned and sprinted to the helmet. The faster she ran, the farther away it appeared. The Chief grabbed his knife. He took a step forward and threw it. The blade flew towards the back of Tex's neck. It was meant to pierce her spine, killing her instantly, but by some horrible twist of fate, Tex, who had reached her helmet, heard the sound and turned to see what was making it. The blade easily penetrated the soft skin around the front of her neck. The blade stabbed through Tex's jugular vein and blood squirted out from the wound. The blade sunk deeper, blocking her windpipe and finally stopped, mere centimeters from her vertebrae, denying her a quick and painless death. Tex's eyes opened wide and she clutched her throat, struggling to breathe. She attempted to pull the blade out of her neck, but the serrated edges on the Chief's knife only dug deeper to the inside of her throat. Slowly, her attempts at removing the blade from her neck weakened and her eyes rolled into the back of her head. Her arms fell limp at her sides and her head hit the concrete floor. Blood dripped from her open mouth which was frozen in pain and terror like the rest of her face.

The Chief walked over to the body and, remembering the apparent rise from the dead, knelt down and violently yanked the blade free from its human sheath. More blood splattered the floor, as well as the Chief's armor. He put the blade back in its leather sheath on his waist. He then checked her bio-signs, which were flat. Just to make sure, he removed one of his gauntlets and checked for a pulse. Satisfied that there was none, the Chief closed her eyes, stood and left the laboratory. He stopped outside the door to assess Lopez, who was not as badly damaged as he appeared. After a quick examination and a few wire reconnections, Lopez was back online.

"Lopez, I need you to go into the lab and hide any data about the Flag that you can find. The Reds will be coming down here to clean, and we can't let them find the information. Once you're done, I need you to damage yourself again so the Red Zealots don't become suspicious. If you can't hide the data safely, destroy it, understand?"

"Affirmative. I will begin immediately."

Lopez rushed into the room. The Chief realized that the Zealots would waste no time getting to the lab to begin cleanup. The Chief had to buy Lopez some time, and since Lopez's radio was damaged by Tex, he couldn't ask how far along he was. The Chief saw that there were security cameras that had activated to keep track of the intruder. The Chief had deflected the one chair into the camera in the lab camera on purpose so the Red Prophet wouldn't be able to monitor their actions later. The Chief knew there was another camera just around the corner, and another one at the entrance. Simply walking up there and waiting several minutes wouldn't work, as the Zealots would grow wary. The Chief decided that the only thing to do was to concentrate on his wounds. He had learned to push pain out of his mind; a trick that had saved his life countless times. Now he had to focus on it. The rush knocked the wind out of the Chief as he fully realized how bad the extents of his injuries were. The more he concentrated on the pain, the worse it hurt him. He clutched his stomach and rounded the corner . . .

* * *

>"Look!" cried Donut. Most of the Reds in the security room had fallen asleep. Donut's cry woke them up instantly. Some fell out of their chairs. Donut pointed to one of the screens that showed Master Chief come out from behind a corner. All of the Reds cheered at the Master Chief's success until one of the Red Zealots shouted. <p>"He's wounded!"<p>

Sure enough, the Chief looked as if he was struggling to stand. One hand clutched his stomach while the other was against the wall to steady himself. He fell several times, smearing blood on the floor.

"Get a medical staff down there immediately," commanded the Red Prophet. "When he opens that door, take him to the medical wing."

Doc accompanied the medical staff down to the door that the Master Chief was behind. The rest of the Reds watched as the Chief finally made his way to the panel and reached out with his wavering hand to open the door.

* * *

>Master Chief collapsed on the stairs right underneath the panel. He reached up with his hand, then dropped it, feigning weakness.
<p>Lopez, I sure hope you're done in there.

The Chief was now starting to feel the pain a lot worse now. His vision clouded and he reached up with the last of his strength trying to reach the panel. His finger barely tapped the button to open the door. As soon as it did, the door slid open and the Chief blacked out.

* * *

>"Guys, I hate to interrupt, but zero seconds."

A dial tone sounded from Church's robotic stomach and everyone turned towards him.

"What? Oh, son of a-"

His complaint was cut short by the explosion from the ten megaton bomb in his mechanical stomach. It was amplified from the lightning from Lopez's weather machine and tore a hole in the space-time continuum. Everyone survived except the present. The bomb's explosion warped time to such an extent that the era that the Reds and Blues were in was torn apart. That was the story Simmons had told him, but the Chief had often wondered at what point in time they had started in. Why had the UNSC never reported the existence of other humans that were fighting a civil war? What point in time was **he** **at** anyway? And if these people and this war had never been reported, was it possible that they had been wiped out before the UNSC could find them? It seemed logical . . . it had happened to the Forerunners.

* * *

>The Chief sat up quickly, but winced as he remembered the knife wounds. He felt medical wrap around his abdomen and was thankful for the stuff immediately. He then realized that he lying on an examination table in a medical wing. He was also wearing loose-fitting clothes. The shirt was red with short sleeves. The pants were also red and were made of similar material like that of civilian boxer shorts. The Chief felt uncomfortable in the clothes, as he was used to wearing his armor. He looked to his left and saw Simmons, who was sleeping at a table and Lopez, who was facing away from both of them. <p>"Lopez," whispered the Chief.<p>

If his guess was correct, Simmons had many late nights worrying about the Chief's condition and was probably catching up on some much needed rest. Lopez heard the Chief and walked over to him.

"How are you feeling?" Lopez asked. His tone was as monotonous as ever, but it was hushed a few decibels, as to not wake Simmons.

"Better, thanks. I think I need some rest, but I'll be ready to go in a few days. Were you successful?"

"Yes. I stored the data inside my body. Luckily, the Zealots were too busy fussing over their laboratory to take any notice of me. Lock-jaw carried my body to the guest chambers where Simmons reactivated me. I then gave everything to Doc, who put it in a safe place."

"Excellent work, Lopez, excellent," the Chief yawned, "work." The fight had taken a lot out of him. The Chief fell back against his pillow and drifted off to sleep where dreams- and nightmares- awaited him.

To Be Continued

14. Headlong

Chapter XIV

_After his rigorous battle with Tex who seemed to have risen from the dead, the Master Chief spent several days recovering from grievous wounds he sustained. Immediately following his recovery, Red Squad packed up for their journey to the last recorded sighting of the two remaining soldiers from Blue Base at Blood Gulch . . . _

"So, this teleporter will take us directly to the construction site?" Master Chief asked the Red Prophet.

"I am positive. Our teleportation technology is quite advanced. You experienced it firsthand, did you not?"

"Well, yeah, but that was from one side of this valley to the other. We're talking about traveling into another hemisphere."

"A few hundred feet, a few hundred miles, it makes no difference. Our technology is inspired by the ever-guiding light of the Red Flag. It has not failed us, and it most certainly will not fail you, Reclaimer."

At the mentioning of that last word, the Chief was presented memories

of a floating, blue sphere. He didn't know why, but he instantly didn't like it. The flashes were similar to the events that occurred when he saw Lock-jaw for the first time and when he saw Lopez's plasma rifle. He had since had many of these visions and was quite used to them popping up at the strangest of encounters with the senses.

The smell of the burning Blue Zealots had shown him pictures of flipped warthog vehicles and charred bodies of marines. The sight of a plasma based light reconnaissance vehicle, dubbed the 'ghost' had shown him images of Elites attacking him and fellow marines on said vehicles. The sound of the Red Prophet's religious ramblings made him see images of strange, ornate aliens seated in hovering chairs.

These visions no longer assaulted his mind violently, but in all of them, the presence of something sinister always lurked in the recesses of his mind. He always had to brush it aside to focus on the matters at hand.

"I'll take your word for it. How long will it take to reach the construction site?"

"Time is not an element in teleportation. You are transported instantaneously through the voids of time and space to your destination. The only advice I can give you is to be prepared for anything."

"I always am. Ready everyone? Here we go."

The Master Chief boldly stepped into the swirling green vortex and vanished. The remaining soldiers of Red Squad followed until all of them were gone. One of the Zealots turned to address his leader.

"Sir, how long do you think it will take for them to find O'Malley?"

"I don't know, but I will pray for him."

"I too will pray for the Master Chief."

"No, not the Reclaimer, for O'Malley."

"What? Why would you pray for our enemy?"

"I only pray that his death is quick and painless." The Prophet lowered his head. "However, I fear that my prayer may not be answered. This matter falls out of the jurisdiction of even the Holy Flag . . ."

* * *

>"Wyoming!" O'Malley's voice blared through the man's radio and rattled his eardrums. After shaking off the buzzing sound in his ears, Wyoming responded. <p>"What is it, ol' chap?"<p>

"Our second attempt to aquire that blasted super laser has failed."

"Shall I go fetch the mission recording?"

"No, my agent within the Red Zealots has informed me that the body was burned, along with the armor. That means the mission recording was lost."

Wyoming had to admit, despite his severe ego issues and constant failed attempts at creating doomsday devices, O'Malley was an impressive presence. He had managed to turn a fanatical flag-worshipping moron into a loyal spy; not a very easy task.

"I will scout ahead to the next location. It is a shame that our third edition will not be able to reivew her predecessor's battle. She will do fine, nonetheless."

"Hmm. Indeed. I will prepare Tex for the . . . procedure." O'Malley began with his maniacal laugh, which always lasted much longer than necessary.

Wyoming couldn't help but crack a smile. He knew what O'Malley meant by 'procedure' and knew that this DNA extraction would be extremely painful. And it should be, because even a man of Wyoming's class and sophistication would accept such brutal treatment if two copies of himself had failed to accomplish a simple task like stealing a flag, or data relating to it's destructive properties . . .

* * *

>Master Chief only felt it for a millisecond, but the feeling washed over him like an electrical surge. His molecules were instantly transported to the teleporter the Red Zealots had erected at the site named 'Headlong' by Red Command. The Chief stepped away from the teleporter as the rest of his troops came through. He checked to make sure they were all there. After a successful head count, the Chief looked around. Not only was the place a construction site, it looked abandoned, but looks can be decieving, as he would later find out.
<p>"We are going to be here for at least three days. We need a base of operations where we can pitch camp. Grif, scout the area and check for any signs of enemy activity. Simmons, go with him."<p>

The Chief moved into a room. There were no doors, which would make moving about easier. The Chief surveyed the immediate area. The room he was standing in was spacious. A hallway connected it with another room. The room had three large crates that were empty. There was large window which dropped down several feet to a platform below. There were two sets of guard rails on either end of the hallway in the room with the boxes, and both of them overlooked a staircase. The Master Chief decided that both rooms would do nicely. Lopez helped the Chief reorganize the empty crates so that they could be used to temporarily set up scientific equipment for more research on the Flag and its healing properties. Everyone had set up camp when Grif contacted the Chief over the radio.

"Uh, Chief? I think we have a serious situation here. You better come take a look."

"I'm on my way, stay put."

The Chief left the room in a hurry, searching for Grif and Simmons. He walked past the teleporter and saw that Grif and Simmons were on a

walkway on the outside of another building. The Chief also took notice of what appeared to be a war going on. He saw that a makeshift bridge had been established and the Chief crossed it to join with his scouts. At this point, none of them needed any visual enhancement to see what was going on.

There were, apparently, two sides to the conflict; soldiers sporting brown armor with various colored patches painted at random locations on their armor were fighting a much larger Blue force. The brown-clad soldiers had an M808B Main Battle Tank and several rocket launchers. The Blue forces had three tanks and were armed to the teeth with the newest Blue Army technology. Fortunately for the brown-clad soldiers, their aim was terrible. Despite their superior aim and battle tactics, the brown armored soldiers were fighting a battle that they simply could not win. Alone. The Chief opened his radio to the rest of Red Squad.

"Everyone, get your weapons ready. We've been invited to a party, and it would be so very impolite to decline. Doc, get your medical gear. Saddle up, men, we're going in."

To Be Continued

15. Saviors

Chapter XV

After departing from Battle Creek, Red Squad happened upon a group of soldiers fighting a larger force of the Blue Army. The Master Chief decided to even the odds . . . _

Bullets whizzed past, missing soldiers by millimeters. Rockets detonated tossing debris in all directions. Grenades, thrown with the accuracy of a three year old, landed near the soldiers and exploded harmlessly. The Reds' tank, perched on an unfinished section of road, spied a warthog driving up a ramp going at full speed. As the warthog went airborne, the tank fired a round into the jeep, destroying it and killing the three Blue occupants. Two soldiers were lying on a dirt mound that led up to the tank's position and were firing their snipers into the Blue's ranks. The rest had taken up cover near the unfinished building that they called 'home'. Despite the occasional kill, Commander Schreiber of the Red Army Special Forces knew that the battle was over before it started. The initial ambush had wiped out half of his men. Of those that remained, three were too injured to fight. The other six were giving the twenty some Blue Soldiers quite a fight, but they were exhausted; it wouldn't last much longer.

Suddenly, with his trained eye, Schreiber saw Blue soldiers drop to the ground, clutching their necks in agony. A thin trail of smoke pinpointed the attacker; a man in a suit of armor that was neither orange nor yellow, but some disgusting mix in between. He was accompanied by a man in maroon armor, who was also using the sniper rifle. The maroon one's aim needed some practice, but Schreiber was thankful for the assistance, however futile. He then heard some strange noise behind him, like a charge. He knew it wasn't his own troops, since they were all up on the front lines. He turned to see the source of the noise, and was frozen to the ground. There were six of them from what he could see. A man in jade armor led the charge

accompanied by a man in purple armor, a man in red armor and one in lightish-red armor. There was a droid with them and some sort of monster holding a ball. The jade armored man stopped next to Schreiber and began ordering his soldiers to various positions. The one in the purple armor tended to the wounded. The droid and the lightish-red armored and the red armored soldier took up positions, giving aid to his own men. The monster with the ball disappeared before his eyes. The man in the jade armor shouted above the sounds of war.

"Where's the commanding officer?"

"You're looking at him."

The Chief nodded, then lifted a Battle Rifle with one arm and plugged three rounds into the head of a Blue that had gotten too close.

"Have your men fire on the front lines, my people can take it from here."

Normally Schreiber would object, but his men were taking quite a beating. He gave the order and all of the brown-armored soldiers began firing straight into the front lines of the Blue forces.

The Master Chief was glad he didn't have to argue over the matter. He then contacted Andy on his radio.

"Andy, are you in position?"

"Yeah, Lock-jaw set me in the middle of the tanks. Just say the word, Chief."

Master Chief waited until the friendly alien appeared at his side.

"Now."

The explosion tore through the M808B's, annihilating them. The tanks' unlucky operators were flash-fried, as were any Blue soldiers unlucky enough to be caught in the blast radius. The Blues were in disarray. Their tanks just exploded and they were frantically trying to find out why, while still fighting the Red forces. Perfect.

Master Chief nodded to Lock-jaw and both of them charged out into the battle. All fire ceased as the two Reds ran out into the open. Blue soldiers, enraged over the deaths of their friends, went to meet them, thirteen against two. What a bad day to be a Blue. Master Chief punched a Blue in the stomach, picked him up by his shoulders and kneed him in the groin, pulverizing the organs. He threw the body into the other advancing Blues, knocking some down. Lock-jaw leapt at the nearest Blue and pinned him to the ground under his hooves. He punched the Blue through the visor, crushing his skull. Lock-jaw leapt off the dead soldier sideways, cart-wheeled in the air and landed on another Blue. Lock-jaw pulled his head back, and the Chief kicked his face in with his boot. The, one Blue jumped on his back. Another went for his legs, knocking him down. Lock-jaw picked up the Blue on the Chief's back by the neck and squeezed. After he felt the neck snap, he dropped the corpse to see the Master Chief rip the arm off the Blue that had grabbed his feet. The Blue stood up in shock

and began screaming. The Chief held the limb like a bat and smacked the Blue in the head. The Blue stumbled, but didn't fall and continued to scream. The Chief took a few steps back and wound up another swing. He sprinted towards the Blue, who turned to face him, only to have his own arm connect with his helmet. The force of the impact twisted the Blue's neck until it snapped. The Chief dropped the arm and turned to see Lock-jaw put his hoof right through a Blue soldier's stomach. The last seven Blues looked in horror at the two Reds before them. They had never seen such brutality before, and weren't prepared to see it used against them. The Blue farthest away pointed at them, tossed his head back and screamed.

"Run _away!_"

The other Blues thought that was a good idea, and they began screaming and fleeing in terror. Lock-jaw took a step forward, but the Chief put a hand on his trusty alien's shoulder, pointing to where the Blues were running; right for the three decimated tanks. As soon as all the soldiers were within the blast radius, Andy exploded again. The Blues were violently torn apart from the blast while they scurried over the wrecked chassis's of the tanks. The smoldering bodies were sent flying into buildings and construction equipment. Lock-jaw went to retrieve Andy while Master Chief went back to talk with the brown soldier's leader.

Commander Schreiber looked at the man as he approached. Blood stained his jade armor, making some spots a sickly brown color. He showed no signs of injury, but perhaps a bit of fatigue. With combat moves like that, he had definitely been in battle before. Unlike the rest of his men who stared at the man in awe and fear, Schreiber looked at the man with admiration. It had been a while since he had seen a good Blue massacre. The Chief was now standing in front of the Commander. He saw the insignia painted on the man's shoulder and snapped a salute.

"I am the Master Chief, Spartan 117," he said.

"At ease, son," Schreiber said. The Chief assumed the pose; his feet shoulder width apart and hands clasped behind his back. "I am Commander Steven Schreiber of the Red Army Special Forces."

Schreiber looked around at the decimated Blue forces.

"Thanks for the help."

"Anytime. Do you have a base of operations?"

"Right here," Schreiber patted the building he was standing next to. "Let's head inside, we've got a lot to talk about."

Master Chief nodded and motioned for his forces to move in. Doc helped one of the wounded men to his feet and walked him into the building. The other two who were still too weak to walk were scooped up by Lopez and Lock-jaw and carried inside. Schreiber's men thanked the Chief for his help as they walked by. The Chief looked at the carnage he and Lock-jaw had created and smiled. Soon, O'Malley would suffer the same fate. The Chief turned and followed the Reds inside.

To Be Continued

16. Patrol Partners

Chapter XVI

_After successfully helping the Red Army Special Forces defeat the Blue soldiers, Red Squad entered their Base of Operations. After the Chief had finished telling his squad's tale, Commander Schreiber told his . . . _

"It started five days ago," Schreiber began. "The Office of Red Intelligence told us that they had picked up Blue transmissions coming from this area. Red Command had authorized a test of a secret weapons project code named 'Rhinoceros' which was supposed to be sent in to find and eliminate the source of the transmission. We aren't sure what it was or what it was supposed to do, but they lost contact with it so they sent us in to find out what happened. We searched a small urban area and found a downed Blue Bug Walker. I'm not sure what took it down, but Intel suggests that only one unit was involved."

"Only one?" the Chief had heard stories of a lone Bug Walker destroying entire regiments of Red soldiers. He then realized he had interrupted, but caught himself too late. The Commander just grinned.

"That's right, just one. Now, if you managed to get on top of one of those Bugs, you could, theoretically, take out the pilots and the guards and activate the self destruct sequence. And, even though that's the only way anyone _thinks_ a Bug can be taken down, there were so signs of internal damage and all the Blues inside were killed when the thing fell. There was, however, a deep gash in the hydraulic systems of the two front legs. Something had cut through them, and it wasn't plasma. It was metal. Someone, or some_thing_, cut a foot into the indestructible hydraulic pipes with a metal blade of unknown origin."

Nobody spoke for several seconds, pondering the kind of brute force a single being needed to do such a thing. The Commander cleared his throat.

"Anyway, after we found the Bug, we moved on to other areas, searching for clues as to where this Rhinoceros project went to when we arrived here. We were informed that the ORI had pinpointed its signal to our location, and it was only minutes after that when we were ambushed. Two Blues with rocket launchers came out from behind a corner and fired at us point blank. I was at the rear, looking at something that Private Gonzalez had found when we heard the explosion. The Blues had killed themselves and nine of my men. Privates Davis, Jenkins and Wallace were wounded. The rest of us had been pinned down for an hour when you guys showed up."

"And it's lucky that we showed up when we did," Doc said. All eyes turned to him. "Those three were in critical condition when I got to them. If we had gotten here just a minute later, I don't think all of them would have made it."

The Commander nodded his head. "For that, you have our utmost

gratitude." He turned back to the Chief. "So, you were looking for two Blue soldiers that escaped Blood Gulch?"

"That's correct. They escaped and were last sighted in this area before they left for an unknown destination. We are trying to find them to interrogate them because they were the last ones to be in contact with O'Malley before he took Sarge."

"Were these Blues good fighters?"

"Well, to quote Private Grif, 'they sucked so much ass that the only thing they could do was talk shit'."

The remark made the two women of the Special Forces giggle and look at Grif, who was grinning.

"I wouldn't have said it if it wasn't true, Chief," Grif said. Nods and murmurs of approval from Donut and Simmons backed up his statement.

"I believe you. So far, that Tex thing was the only threat the Blues have thrown at us. And it wasn't even Blue."

"Ah HA!" Andy shouted from his spot on a table. "So you agree with me that she isn't a chick!"

"No, I'm implying that she isn't human. Whatever Tex is, it has a female persona. Sorry Andy, you're still alone on that one."

"Damnit."

"I can assemble my troops to go look for these Blues," the Commander offered.

"They can pair up with my squad and get to know each other," the Chief said. Schreiber smiled.

"Sounds good to me," he said.

The Chief turned to his squad while Schreiber turned to his men and women.

"Grif, you get up on that catwalk and survey the area. If they're here, I don't want them creeping around trying to evade the search parties."

"You got it," Grif said. He began to walk to the ramp when one of the ladies that had laughed at his joke walked up to him.

"I'm Private Weller," she said. "I'm your spotter."

"Thanks anyway, but I don't lift. I'm not much of a gym person."

Weller giggled and the two began their ascent to the highest completed catwalk.

"Simmons," the Chief said. "You patrol the area around this building."

"Yes sir."

Simmons walked to the door where a man with a large scar on his face waited.

"The name's Richards. How's it going?" he asked.

"Pretty good, my name's Simmons. How about yourself?"

"Eh, I've been better. That Master Chief of yours is one pretty awesome guy."

"Yeah, he is." Simmons smiled as he thought about how positive the Chief was, while being a strict disciplinarian at the same time. Very unlike Sarge had been. Simmons felt a pang of guilt at the thought of the negative aspects of Sarge. The man had been like a father to him, but there were more benefits to having the Chief around. Simmons felt a tear form in his eye and quickly put his helmet on. Richards noticed and also donned his helmet. As they walked outside the base, Richards put a hand on Simmons' shoulder.

"Listen, I heard about your Sergeant, and I guess you feel pretty bad about it."

"Yeah . . . I do."

A few seconds of silence passed as they started their patrol. Richards tapped his fingers together.

"Want to talk about it?"

-

"Donut, you patrol the building on the other side of our Base of Operations."

"Okey dokey, Chief."

Donut walked to the same door Simmons left from and was greeted by the other woman in Schreiber's team. She smiled at Donut, who smiled back.

"Hi, I'm Parker," she said.

"I'm Donut."

"I think that's an awesome name!" Parker said enthusiastically.

"Thanks! The other guys didn't think so at first, but I think it grew on them."

"And I _love_ your pink armor!"

Donut was about to make the usual 'lightish-red' correction, but stopped himself.

"You know what? So do I. At first, I hated it, but I got used to it. You see, my old red armor used to chafe my thighs something awful . . ." Donut continued his story as the two made their way across the construction zone to begin their patrol.

-

The Master Chief was glad that he was picking the right people to go with Schreiber's troops.

"Caboose, I need you to patrol the small section of the road that the tank is on and the hallways near it."

"Yes sir, Chester Sleeve, sir," Caboose said.

"Caboose, its Master Chief."

Caboose either didn't hear him or thought he was talking to someone else because he went to meet his patrol partner.

"The name's Bond," he said. "Nice to meet you."

"My name is Caboose, and it is nice to- oh look! A wall!"

Bond laughed and steered Caboose away from the wall.

"So, you like walls?"

"Who are you?"

Bond laughed again as the two walked out of the base.

-

"Lopez, you patrol around our base," said the Chief.

"Yes sir."

Lopez walked over to another door and was greeted by a man with brown hair and a thin mustache.

"I'm Private Gonzalez."

"I am Lopez, Red Army Service Droid Mark Three."

"You're a droid? Awesome, amigo! I'm a mechanic!"

"Thank God. I was beginning to think I would never find someone who understands me."

"Same here. I've got some questions I'd like to ask you if you don't mind. I've never been able to have a conversation with a droid before."

"And I almost never get the opportunity to talk to people who aren't idiots."

The two left the temporary HQ and went to start their patrol.

The Chief turned to Doc.

"Can you keep tabs on the wounded?"

"You bet. I think I can find some ways to cheer them up. You know what they say; laughter is the greatest medicine!"

"Who says that?"

"Well, if I had to guess, I would say Clowns are the ones who coined the phrase. I mean, seriously, have you ever seen a sick Clown?"

"No, I can't say that I have."

"Well, that settles that. I'll be in the infirmary."

Doc turned and left. Master Chief saw that Lock-jaw and Andy were sitting in a corner, talking about CrunchBite. The Chief felt remorse for the alien; one of his parents was dead and the other was the enemy. Even worse, the living parent had abandoned him. The Chief was glad to see the alien happy in times like these. He turned to Commander Schreiber, who was looking at a map of the immediate area.

"If they aren't here, we should look in this area next.," he pointed to a spot on the map that appeared to be an almost completed section of a settlement. "Some strange activity has been going on lately. Blue forces keep sending distress signals and a tram-car system has been damaged, causing it to travel at top speeds without stopping. I think it has something to do with that Rhino weapon, but we'll just have to wait and see."

* * *

>"And that's how we got here," Simmons concluded. He had told Richards everything he remembered about the O'Malley ordeal, which had taken a good three hours. <p>"Now, don't you feel better?"<p>

"Yeah, I do. Thanks Richards."

Richards had also explained the more interesting parts of his career to Simmons. Having shared such personal information, both men felt like they had known the other for years. Like brothers. Simmons had made a real friend.

* * *

>For the last several hours, Grif had been making Weller laugh by talking about his teammates and cracking jokes. Weller was almost in tears from laughing so hard. <p>"And then, I told him to use his 'jetpack' to fly to the highest ground and he goes 'that's a great idea, Grif' and runs away. He got captured like five minutes later."<p>

Weller was leaning against a wall trying to catch her breath. Grif was kind enough to allow for it without starting another joke. It had been years since Weller laughed so hard, and she was finally remembering why. Her lungs were on fire from lack of proper oxygen intake. She decided it was worth it.

"Ok, so then, there was this time when we were at Sidewinder, and I was stuck in a jail cell with this Blu-"

"Grif!"

"What?"

"If you keep making me laugh like this, you're not going to have a patrol partner."

"Oh, right. Sorry. Anyway, I was stuck in a jail cell with this Blue, see, and we were trying to figure out a way to escape . . ."

Weller sighed and listened to his version of the events at Sidewinder. It was only a matter of seconds before she burst out laughing. It was going to be a very long night.

* * *

>"And that's how I was voted 'Most Likely to be Fabulous' in high school." Donut concluded. <p>"Wow that must have been great."<p>

"Yeah, it really was."

He and Parker had been talking about all sorts of things for a while ranging from their childhoods to what their dreams were. Donut was happy to have made such a good friend. It wasn't too often he found someone who shared most of his interests. In fact, he hadn't met anyone who shared his interests since he shipped out for basic training. Donut then recalled a particularly funny story; the time when Grif was run over by Sheila, and talked about it later into the night.

* * *

>"So Caboose, what's your take on global warming?" Bond asked. <p>Caboose had been asked many questions during their patrol, all of which he gave a very unique answer. Bond was fascinated by Caboose's thought process. He found that talking to Caboose was a good way to relieve stress.

"I don't think the government should support it anymore. If the snow globes get too hot, the snow will melt, and when you shake it up, nothing will happen because the snow will turn to water. Then it will just be a water globe."

Bond smiled at the reply. His smile lingered as he thought about how happy Caboose appeared. I guess ignorance really is bliss, he thought.

* * *

>"From that day on, I decided to always check under my pillow for spiders." <p>Lopez had just finished telling Gonzalez about how his robot army met their demise at the hands, or whatever passed for hand with arachnids, of blue fuzzy spiders that attached themselves to the robots' heads and exploded. Gonzalez visibly shuddered when he thought about how many spiders he had allowed to live over the years.

Each one was a potential threat to humanity.<p>

"I guess I will too."

* * *

>"Thank you!" Simmons shouted. "Where's Grif, I want to show him that you agree; it's pronounced 'bo-th', not 'bol-th'." <p>As if summoned by Simmons' declaration, something from Grif's location decided to give him away. A piece of scrap metal fell on Simmons' head, knocking him to the ground.<p>

"Ow! Son of a bitch!" Simmons shouted. He rubbed the back of his helmet and looked up to where the metal had fallen from and decided Grif was up there.

"Grif, you cockbite, why'd you throw this at me?"

"Maybe he didn't throw it."

"What makes you say that?"

"Listen."

They could both hear giggling and squeals of glee coming from where Grif was. Simmons was good at math, so he took Grif, added an attractive, probably stupid, female soldier and came up with the answer: Bow-Chik-A-Bow-Wow. Of course, Simmons didn't know that Grif was simply telling jokes.

"Oh, he's gonna get it," Simmons said, thinking about the punishment the Chief would give him.

"Simmons? I'm afraid he already getting it."

* * *

>Five minutes after Simmons was hit on the head, the patrols were reporting in. Simmons and Richards were first, followed by Weller and Grif. Simmons stared at Grif with a knowing look in his eyes, but Grif didn't care, as usual. Lopez and Gonzalez came in next, followed by Bond and Caboose. Donut and Parker came in last. <p>Master Chief and Commander Schreiber looked over all of them.<p>

"It is clearly evident that the Blue soldiers I am looking for are not here. We will move to another location tomorrow to investigate further. Red Squad, you are dismissed. Return to the base."

Everyone from Red Squad turned and said goodbye to their new friends. Simmons squeezed Richards shoulder. Parker hugged Donut. Lopez and Gonzalez shook hands. Grif looked like he was going to launch into another story, but Weller put her finger to where his mouth would be. Bond gave Caboose a pat on the back. Doc said goodnight to his patients. After they were gone, Master Chief turned and saluted Commander Schreiber, who returned the gesture.

"Get some sleep, soldier," he said. "You're gonna need it."

To be Continued

17. Terminal

Chapter XVII

_After getting to know Commander Schreiber's team during a patrol, in which they found nothing, Red Squad retired to their base. The next day, Master Chief and Red Squad woke up early to prepare for the continuation of their search for Tucker and Church and for a possible encounter with the Rhinoceros super weapon . . . _

Master Chief walked into the makeshift lab that he and Lopez had set up. Doc was sitting at the table reviewing the data he had gotten from the nano-chip.

"Make any more breakthroughs?"

"No. I think the most we got from this was the regenerative properties, which is still pretty good."

"Indeed. Listen, I need you to tuck this stuff somewhere safe. We'll be returning here after we search the train station area."

"Will do."

Master Chief walked into the main sleeping area and saw that everyone was ready to go. Some adjusted the settings on their weapons, others stowed their gear. The Chief was proud of all of them.

"Master Chief," Schreiber said over the radio. "The ferry will be here in five minutes. Have your squad down there in three."

"Yes sir." The Chief turned to his men. "Alright everyone, let's move out."

The night before, Schreiber made a call to Red Command to order two transport warthogs. Red Command had sent them to the nearest Red Outpost and had them ferried across the water to Schreiber's location. Red Squad arrived at the dock and was joined shortly by Schreiber and his team. The three wounded had been taken back to Red Command overnight via Pelican. After two minutes of waiting, the ferry arrived and unloaded its shipment; the two transport hogs. Each one could hold six, but there were thirteen soldiers going on the search since Doc was going to stay behind in case there were any wounded that would need treatment. The problem was solved when Weller decided to sit on Grif's lap, to which Grif had no complaints. With that they were off.

It took two hours to get to the train station, dubbed 'Terminal' by Red Command, and when they arrived they saw that they weren't alone. A Blue force of at least forty soldiers was actively patrolling the area. These soldiers weren't just grunts either. There were at least three Sergeants and a Lieutenant with them. They were also armed to the teeth; four M808B's, three Gauss Hogs and five Ghosts were making routine inspections of the area.

"You think they're looking for us?" the Chief asked.

"I don't think so," Schreiber replied.

The Red soldiers abandoned their vehicles and silently made their way through the train station. They came to a point where they had to cross the tracks. Parker, who had the sharpest senses, went first. She had just put one foot on the track when a mag-train rocketed out of a tunnel and headed straight for her. She was momentarily frozen to the spot watching the train get closer and closer like a deer on a highway. Donut reached out and grabbed her arm, pulling her out of harms way in the nick of time. Parker spun around and bumped into Donut's chest. His hands moved to her waist to steady her. Suddenly he realized that he was holding her closely; too closely for his liking. He liked Parker, but not that way. Donut let go and she took a step back.

"Thanks, Donut," she whispered.

"Anytime," Donut replied.

After deciding that crossing the tracks single file was suicidal, Master Chief was about to suggest that they ran across one at a time when Grif tapped his shoulder and pointed up. There was a walkway that went above the train and had ramps leading to their current level. They moved across the ramp quickly and ended up on the other side. The Chief looked around, trying to find where to go next. Then he spotted a narrow doorway that lead up to a parking garage. He motioned towards it and everyone fell in line behind him. There was a gradual incline that led up to the garage and everyone slowly made their way up. After making sure the garage was secure, everyone fell out, guarding doorways and windows. Chief was looking around the room for a position for Grif to scout from when the answer dripped onto his visor. The Chief looked up at a square opening in the ceiling. There was some sort of moisture dripping from it and the Chief decided that it deserved a closer look. Grif was in front of the Chief and he put his hands on his shoulders. Grif jumped and spun about, aiming his rifle at the Chief's head. After realizing who it was, he quickly lowered it.

"Sorry, Chief. It's a little creepy, you know, forty Blues on your back and you don't know if they know where you are."

"I feel the same way," the Chief replied. He wasn't as jumpy as Grif, but that came with experience and a lifetime of training. "See that air-conditioning vent? I need you to check it out."

"You got it."

Master Chief got on one knee and cupped his hands. Grif nodded and handed Weller his sniper rifle. He put his foot in the Chief's hand and the Chief launched him up. Grif jumped from the clasped hands and sailed into the vent. He landed inside with a metallic _thud_ and looked around. Whatever he was in, it wasn't like the air-conditioning vents he saw on TV. Most of the time, someone was crawling on their stomachs just to squeeze through. Grif was able to stand completely upright in this one. He walked around the area, closely inspecting whatever he came across, which meant that he walked straight ahead and didn't look back. He walked a few feet and saw that the vent ended overlooking a waiting room. Grif backtracked to where he thought he was launched up, but made a wrong turn and almost fell out of a small opening nearly three stories above the ground. He could see almost all of the Blue activity outside of the garage from his vantage point and smiled. It was the perfect area for

sniping. Grif found the spot where he entered and looked down.

"Chief, this place is weird," Grif was about to ask if Weller could join him, but decided that it would be best if the Chief inspected the place. "You might want to check it out."

Master Chief nodded and handed up Grif's sniper rifle and his own battle rifle. Then, the Chief launched himself into the air and grabbed onto the side of the opening. Grif grabbed his hands and hauled him inside. After looking at everything Grif saw, the Chief went back down through the open hatch.

"I'll send Weller up there. You are to survey the Blue activity, but do not fire unless I tell you to, understand?"

"Yup."

"Good." Chief was about to go get Weller when he remembered something. "Oh, and Grif?"

"Yeah?'

"Don't make Weller laugh. It'd be nice if we could stay here unnoticed for a while."

The Chief left leaving Grif with a smirk on his face. After sending Weller through the hole, the Chief located Commander Schreiber, who was watching the Blues through one of the large openings in the wall.

"I don't think we'd survive if they attacked us," he said.

The Chief hung his head. He had faced impossible odds before, but he knew that they would need a miracle to survive if they were attacked by the Blues here.

"Sir!" Simmons' voice interrupted his moment of thought. The Chief turned to Simmons who was leaning with his back to the wall. Richards was in the same position, but on the other side of the door that led down to the train station.

"What is it?" the Chief asked.

"We have contact! There are three Blues approaching our location! What do we do, sir?"

To Be Continued

18. Even the Odds

Chapter XVIII

_When Master Chief and Commander Schreiber arrived at the train station with their squads, they saw an impressive Blue force that had been deployed for no apparent reason. The Reds had begun to establish a temporary base when Simmons reported that three Blues were approaching their position. Rather than risk exposure, the Chief leapt into action . . . _

The Chief didn't answer Simmons question. Instead, he motioned for everyone to lower their weapons. The Chief sprinted at the door and unsheathed his combat knife. Schreiber got the idea and followed suit. The second the first Blue appeared from behind the door, the Chief leapt over his head, slid against the back wall and landed behind the last Blue. They all turned to face the jade warrior, and the lead man was yanked, silently, into the garage. The Chief wasted no time, and pounced the second his feet touched the ground. His arm struck out, quick as lightning, and sunk his blade into the first Blue's neck. The knife sunk deeper into the Blue's throat until it connected with the vertebrae, severing them and killing the Blue. The Chief let go of the knife and used his momentum from the attack to flip over the Blue and landed behind the last one. He punched the Blue in the abdomen, causing him to double over in pain. The Chief extended his arms out to their sides and balled his hands into fists, and slammed them together. Each fist connected with the Blue's helmet with the force of a wrecking ball, smashing the helmet and the Blue's head inside. The Chief retrieved his blade, placed it in its sheath and dragged the two bodies into the garage, placing them in a corner. The Chief saw that Schreiber had the third Blue tied up and leaning against the wall. His helmet was gone and he was gagged with a handkerchief.

"Good work," Schreiber said. "I caught this one and readied him for interrogation."

Schreiber pulled a vile out of one of the pouches on his belt along with a syringe. The vile contained a strange, silver and red liquid.

"Truth serum?"

"When one is in the Special Forces, they must be prepared for anything, including interrogations. Unfortunately in this day and age, nobody has the time to perform a good, old fashioned interrogation,"

"Thank you," Grif said over the radio. "Finally, some one who agrees with me."

"so I carry some of this around with me just in case." Schreiber finished, ignoring Grif and placing the items back inside their pouch.

The serum had already been administered and the Blue was calm and quiet as a result of one of the side effects. The Chief removed the gag and the Blue looked at him with hate in his eyes.

"What is this Blue force doing here?" the Chief used his sincerest voice as to not scare the man to death.

"We were sent here, t-to find the r-r-red-d s-soldier that t-t-t-took d-down our B-B-B-B-Bug Wa-wa-wa-walker." He was trying to fight the serum's mysterious properties, but it was to no avail.

"What does the soldier look like?" the Chief asked.

"H-he's bigger t-t-than-n-n y-y-y-you . . ." The Blue was really putting up a fight.

Administering more of the serum would kill him, and the Chief wanted to get as much information as possible. Too much resistance to the serum, however, and the Blue would enter a serum-induced seizure where the liquid inside his bloodstream would then become a lethal toxin and kill him.

"Anything else?"

"H-h-h-h-he's-s-s-s g-g-go-got-t-t-t h-h-h-hor-horns-s-s-s on h-h-his h-h-he-head-d-d-d-d." By now the Blue had slipped into a seizure and was violently convulsing on the floor.

"Did he have a name?" the Chief asked. He knew the Blue was about to die, but felt he could get one last piece of information from him.

"C-c-c-c-c-c-ca-ca-called-d-d-d h-h-h-h-hi-himse-himself-f-f-f-f-f th-th-th-the Rhi-rhi-rhin-n-n-n-n-n-n." the Blue's talking was turning into incoherent babbling and his seizure was getting worse. Foam dripped from his mouth and his eyes rolled up in the back of his head.

"The
what?"

"R-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-rhi-rhi-rhi-rhin-rhino-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-c-c-c-c-cer-ce r-cero-ceros."

The Blue stopped shaking. Blood mixed with the foam around his mouth and dripped to the floor in a puddle. His eyes went even farther back into his skull. The Chief closed the soldier's eyes and placed his helmet back on his head. Schreiber made the sign of the cross.

"So, they were looking for the Rhinoceros weapon. Or person, I guess," Schreiber said.

"A big guy with horns on his head is called the Rhinoceros. Sounds like a lame super-villain from a Saturday morning cartoon," Master Chief said.

Schreiber grinned. The Chief was the perfect example of what a good soldier should be. Calm, relaxed while being cautious and alert during any time be it battle or break.

"They followed him here? Can't be good news for us." Simmons said. Richards nodded in agreement.

"They were following him when they stopped here, Simmons," the Chief corrected. "He could be miles away by now. On top of that, he is a Red Army Operative, so even if we do encounter him, he wouldn't attack us." The Chief stopped, realizing that he didn't know all that much about the Rhinoceros project testing. He looked to Schreiber. "Right?"

"I wouldn't know. The Rhinoceros project was deemed highly dangerous to all personnel, Red or Blue. Since it isn't a weapon, I guess the 'dangerous' part was a filler for 'aggressive'. We'll just have wait and see."

After agreeing that staying clear of the Rhinoceros' path in the event he was encountered, the Red soldiers continued to monitor the Blue activity. After several hours of inaction, Grif contacted the Chief over his radio.

"Master Chief, we've got a situation."

"Spill it, Grif."

"Three of those tanks just entered our vicinity. Three of the Ghosts and a Gauss Hog are with them."

"Roger that, I have a visual. Looks like most of the soldiers came over as well. Keep your wits about you, Grif."

"Roger that."

Master Chief activated the zoom function on his visor, allowing him to see the Lieutenant talk with three Blue soldiers. The Chief couldn't hear what they were saying, but he could tell the Ell-Tee wasn't happy. Then, the Chief's heart skipped a beat as one of the Blue soldiers pointed right up in their location. The Chief saw the Lieutenant look at the tanks and wave his arm forward. The Chief deactivated the zoom function and dove for cover just as the first shell from the tank exploded against the ceiling. The other Reds took cover and opened fire.

"All red units, we are under attack! Remain at your posts and guard them as long as you can!"

Everybody followed the orders and fired on the advancing Blue soldiers. The three tanks continued to pour explosive shells into the garage while the soldiers made for every possible entrance. Grif was able to take out some with his expert precision, but was forced to fall back as one of the tanks turned its attention towards him. He and Weller dropped down into the garage and took a position near the windows, occasionally firing into the advancing Blues. Simmons and Richards were protecting the hallway that led up to the garage from the train tracks. When the Blue forces became too thick to kill with bullets, grenades were thrown to soften them up. Bond and Caboose were both holding two pistols in each hand and firing relentlessly into the swarm of hostiles through the large openings in the garage. Lopez, with his rocket launcher, and Gonzalez, with his battle rifle, were also firing out through the large windows. Parker and Donut were protecting the main ramp, where most of the Blues were trying to advance. The Chief saw that they were under the heaviest fire and found a temporary solution to the problem in one of the parking spaces; a brand new, gold plated civilian warthog. The Chief jumped in and hotwired the vehicle. He drove it back to the farthest wall and pointed it at the ramp.

"Donut, move!"

Donut, who was throwing grenades down into the mass of Blues turned to see the Chief accelerate at him. Donut dove out of the way as the golden hog flew past him. The Chief ditched the vehicle at the last second as it landed in the wave of Blue soldiers crushing some under its frame. The best thing was that it was blocking a better part of the ramp and the Blues were scrambling over it. The Chief tossed two grenades into the mass and they rolled to a stop against the hog's

front tires. Excellent. The explosives detonated, causing the hog to blow up as well, killing a good number of Blues in the process. The Chief returned to his post and continued to fire down into the Blue ranks. Then he saw Andy and Lock-jaw, standing around with nothing to do.

"Lock-jaw," the Chief said. "Take Andy and put him at the bottom of the ramp where Donut is shooting."

Lock-jaw blarged and ran with Andy in his hands, turning invisible on his way over. Several seconds later, Lock-jaw appeared at the Chief's side.

"Now, Andy!"

Andy exploded. The blast took nearly all the Blues out in the area and wounded or stunned the ones that weren't killed. Lock-jaw ran down the ramp, retrieved Andy and returned to the upper level.

The Chief turned back to the battle and went to fire at one of the soldiers when he found that his gun had gone empty. He checked his satchel for more ammo, but found that he had used it all. Since the gun was spent, he held it in both hands and crushed it into a spear using his enhanced strength. He then hurled it out the window at a random Blue soldier. the gun-spear penetrated the Blue's chest and tore through his heart.

"I'm out," he said.

"So am I," Grif said.

"Me too," announced Parker.

"We can't keep this up much longer," the Chief said. Nobody disagreed.

The Chief looked up at the air duct and motioned for Grif and Parker to go over there. The Chief threw his last grenade at the nearest tank. It detonated, killing the driver. Since the tank was still intact, another Blue got in and resumed firing.

He got to the duct and launched Grif up into it for the second time. He also threw Parker up there in a similar manner. The Chief motioned to Lopez and Gonzalez. They came over from their spot at the window near the corner of the garage.

"Lopez, I need you to get the rest of the squad into the duct. Gonzalez, give him covering fire."

The Chief ran up to Donut who was single handedly holding off most of the Blue forces. He lifted a Blue that had gotten too close above his head and threw him down into the others, knocking them down and distracting them. He turned to the Chief who relieved him of his last two grenades and pointed to Lopez. Donut nodded and ran off. The Chief activated both grenades and tossed them into the Blues, killing most of them. The Chief glanced down and saw that there were only about fifteen Blues left, but most of them were coming his way. The Chief quickly ran up to Simmons and Richards and pointed to Lopez. They both nodded and began to run off, but Simmons stopped short. He turned around and handed the Chief his M6D Magnum. The Chief checked

the clip; it was full. He nodded and patted Simmons on the shoulder. He then ran up to Schreiber, Weller, Bond, Caboose and Lock-jaw who was holding Andy. He tapped Weller, Bond, Caboose and Lock-jaw on the shoulders and pointed to Lopez. They all nodded, Weller fired a few last rounds from her Battle Rifle and they ran for Lopez. Schreiber looked up at the Chief and rose to his feet. They both ran for Lopez, who had just hoisted Gonzalez into the duct. Lopez wrapped his arm around Schreiber's waist and, using his robotic strength, jumped from the floor straight up into the duct, landing on his feet.

The Chief was about to jump when the remaining fourteen Blues stormed up the ramp and pointed their weapons at him.

"End of the line, Red scum," the Lieutenant said.

"Really?" the Chief replied. He activated a grenade behind his back. "For who?"

The Chief tossed the fragmentation grenade at the Blues and leapt up towards the duct. Lopez grabbed his hand in mid-leap and pulled him up. The grenade detonated and several Blues screamed in pain as the explosion tore their bodies apart. The Reds ran to the opening at the end of the duct. Private Bond took a strange gun from its holster on his waist.

"Told you this thing would come in handy," he said.

"Whatever," Gonzalez replied.

Bond aimed the gun at one of the columns that were scattered about in the waiting room. He fired and a three-pronged claw shot from the barrel. It latched itself to the column and the Chief saw it was connected to the gun by a thick cord. A grappling-gun. Bond stuck the handle of the weapon in a small crack in the floor, wedging it in to make sure it wouldn't come loose. The Reds then slid down the cord one by one. Lopez took the gun out of the crack in the ground and pressed the button to recall the hook. Lopez couldn't slide down the wire since he weighed over four tons; extremely heavy compared to the two-ton soldiers and their armor. Lopez leapt off the edge of the duct and landed on the ground with a crunching sound as the tiles beneath his robotic feet were crushed to powder. He then handed the gun to Bond, who took it and placed it in its holster on his waist. The Reds ran from the room and towards the wall at the far end of the area. There was a dirt ramp leading up to the train tracks. Beyond them sat the two transport hogs and the way out. The Reds ran up the slope and stopped at the train tracks.

"From what I can tell, the train comes through at ten second intervals. We should all be able to jump across." Master Chief shouted.

They waited until the next train rumbled through the station, not stopping for anything in its path. As soon as it was gone, the Chief leapt from the dirt slope onto the concrete ground on the other side. The other Reds followed suit. They were all safely across and ran for the hogs, only to find them destroyed. The remains of what used to be time bombs were attached to the undercarriage.

"They probably set the bombs to go off while we were fighting so we wouldn't hear them explode," Schreiber said.

"That would mean they knew we would come here and probably laid a trap for-"

The Chief stopped mid-sentence and turned around to find ten Blue soldiers along with all four tanks, the remaining Gauss Hog and the last two ghosts. The Lieutenant stepped forward.

"You should be proud of yourselves. You have fought against impossible odds and suffered no casualties. Had you served under me, you would all have been handsomely rewarded. But since you are the enemy . . ." the sounds of the tanks loading their primary cannons finished his sentence.

"Any last words before you are scattered all over this place?"

Boom

"You bet," the Chief said.

Boom

"You Blue bastards may have defeated us."

Boom

"But you'll never defeat the Red Army. They will hunt you down."

**Boom**

"And you will wish you never joined the Blues."

**BOOM**

The Master Chief stopped rambling nonsensically as everyone looked around, trying to find the source of the noise that was getting louder.

**BOOM**

"What _is _that irritable sound?" the Blue Lieutenant asked.

**BOOM . . . BOOM . . . BOOM**

All the Blues slowly turned around to see what the Reds were looking at. What they saw made them quiver with fear.

Before them, several yards behind the tanks, stood the most terrifying person any of them had ever seen. It wore armor almost identical to the rest of the soldiers, except it was grey and was much larger to fit around its three and a half meter tall occupant. There were steel horns on the armor covering the shins, forearms, biceps and shoulders of the man. There were two horns that sprouted from his helmet, the one in the front being longer than the one in the back. The base of the larger horn seemed to curve down into the man's forehead, creating an angry eyebrow effect. All of the horns were stained with blood. The visor was a dark red color, and reflected light the same way the other soldiers' did, giving it an

almost glowing effect. The armor on the forearms was bulkier than regular, and it was quickly revealed why as two spikes emerged from the thick plating. The man in the armor was colossal as well; rippling muscle filled the armor to the point where it looked as though it was his actual skin. The man took a step closer to the tanks.

**BOOM**

The M808B's aimed their barrels right at the monster.

"I wouldn't fire those tanks if I were you. I might live. I might die, but you might want to ask yourselves . . . _one_ question. Feeling lucky?"

Nobody said anything. The Rhinoceros roared and charged directly into the fire of the tanks.

To Be Continued

19. Charge of the Rhinoceros

Chapter XIX

_The Blue forces discovered the Reds' hiding spot and began to attack. After holding off the vastly superior numbers for nearly a half hour, the Reds' ammo supply depleted. The Reds made a hasty retreat to their transport hogs, only to find them destroyed, and just before they were about to be executed, the Rhinoceros project intervened . . . _

The tank shells detonated against the armor of the Rhinoceros. The man was barely slowed by the four simultaneous explosions and continued his charge towards the tanks. He was right in between the first two and ducked his head. The horn pierced through a Blue who had decided to hold his ground. The Rhinoceros quickly whipped his head to the left and brought it up. The horn connected with a tank, sending it skyward. The body of the Blue was thrown loose. Still running, the Rhinoceros charged at another tank, which was slowly bringing its barrel quickly eliminate the inferior Red forces so there would be less problems to worry about. The Rhinoceros grabbed the barrel and tore it off of the rotating turret base. Using the barrel as a club, he brought it above his head and swung it down with lethal force upon the driver canopy. A scream emanated from the canopy as the barrel crushed the life out of the Blue's body. The Rhinoceros quickly turned around and, hefting the barrel like a javelin, hurled it at the next tank. It penetrated the heavy armor on the side and the force pushed it in until it entered the driver canopy. The Blue didn't even have time to scream as the barrel completely destroyed his cranium. The Rhinoceros turned to see the last tank making a hasty retreat. He grinned at the futile attempt and charged. The horns on his head stabbed into the rear of the tank, causing it to spark and catch fire. The Rhinoceros tried to remove his horns from the tank, but found that they were stuck. He grimaced. _I hate it when this happens_ he thought. The Rhinoceros put each hand on one of the rear treads of the tank. He applied pressure to it, but it didn't budge, as expected. The man began to spin in circles. They were slow at first, but then he began to really pick up speed. He could feel the tank begin to slowly slide up his horn and

pushed the treads with all his might. The tank flew free from the horns and sailed up into the air. The Rhinoceros steadied himself, barely feeling the effects of his spin and watched as the tank fell from the sky and landed right in front of the retreating Blues. He stomped up to them, each footstep making a distinct **_**BOOM**_**. He stopped right behind them and watched with satisfaction as they all slowly turned to face him.

"Looks like you just wasted your last lifeline. Sorry pal, try again next time."

The Rhinoceros picked up one of the Blues and stabbed his large cranial horn through the helpless soldier's back. His screams echoed throughout the train station.

"Who wants Blue-kabobs?"

The other Blues screamed and tried to run over the tank, but were stopped as the Rhino leapt over them and landed in front of them, blocking their only exit.

"Leaving so soon? I didn't even get to show you guys my skewers!"

The Rhinoceros brought his two fists to the chests of two Blue soldiers. They looked at each other in confusion until the blades shot out from the bulky forearm armor and pierced through their hearts. The confusion was replaced by pain and screams. The Rhinoceros held up his hands like a child feigning innocence, palms up and elbows at the waist.

"They got a little too close to the sharp, pointy, retractable objects, sorry."

The Rhinoceros looked absolutely terrifying with his blood drenched armor and the three half-dead Blues hanging from various horns. The remaining Blues were frozen to the ground with fear. The Rhinoceros lowered his head and let his hands hang at his sides. The Blues were curious as to why, but any question they had was quickly answered; the man tossed his head back and his arms up, sending the bodies of the Blues flying from the horns they had been so brutally stuck to. The Rhinoceros looked at the rest of the Blues.

"I'm getting bored. Let's finish this."

The Blues, who were still frozen with fear, said nothing as the Rhinoceros lifted the burning remains of the tank above his head and slammed it down on them. The Lieutenant was spared their fate and tried to crawl away.

"You don't think I forgot your present, did you Lieutenant?"

The Rhinoceros walked up to the man and picked him up by the back of his neck. He would be so easy to kill, but Red Command would find much use from this one. The Lieutenant looked at the Rhinoceros in fear as a massive hand was brought to the side of his head. The thumb and forefinger made a circular shape while the last three fingers pointed outward. The forefinger slipped from the thumb and collided with the Lieutenant's helmet. The Rhinoceros had flicked him in the head. The force from the miniscule attack sent the Lieutenant's head

bouncing around inside his helmet. He blacked out.

"I don't take kindly to poachers."

The Rhinoceros placed his large hand around the Lieutenant's waist and was about to call Command when he remembered his radio had been damaged during his fight against the Bug Walker. He spied the Reds, who were rooted to the ground in amazement at the spectacle they had just seen. The Rhinoceros walked over to them.

"Hi there, did you all enjoy the show? I hope so, anyway, listen, my radio's kinda busted up a bit, so if you guys have a spare, I'd really appreciate it if you let me use it."

Nobody responded immediately and the Rhinoceros began to get angry. People were often too amazed by his size to answer his questions, and it had been useful at first. Now it made him angry and many a Red had been crushed to the ground out of blind fury. The Rhinoceros was about to reiterate his question, but he could tell that the man in the jade armor was not as stupefied as he was curious.

"So, you're the Rhinoceros project?" he inquired. Not a drop of fear was on his voice.

"That'd be me, yes. Impressed?" The man was glad someone had spoken up; he was tired of trampling his fellow Reds to death.

"Very. So, you need a new radio? My men can fix you up with one back at our base."

"Excellent. Glad to finally be able to talk to someone without them passing out."

"It takes some getting used to," the Chief said. He remembered back when his division of super-soldiers was first implemented within the UNSC. Inferior ranking officers could barely get out a coherent sentence, especially when a Spartan was wearing their armor.

"I guess. So, you guys have a base. I'm not that great at making my own, so that is very welcome news."

"We need to find a mode of transportation, though. The Blue bastards blew up our hogs."

"Not to worry. The Blues were working on several transport vehicles in a garage, should be enough room to hold all of you."

"What about you?"

"I can run. This suit allows me to do all kinds of stuff without even breaking a sweat."

"Fascinating," said the Chief. He turned to the rest of the Reds and saw that all of them were still awestruck. Commander Schreiber was trying to snap some of his men out of it. "Alright, Red Team!" the Chief shouted. His unexpected demand for attention surprised the Reds, as they had never heard him use that tone of voice and they finally tore their gaze away from the three and a half meter tall being. "Enough gawking at the man, he found something to help us get back to base with. Now, get it together, we're done at the rhino

exhibit. Next stop is the wild pigs, now **MOVE IT**!"

All the Reds flinched at the last two words and began to gather the weapons they dropped when the Rhinoceros first appeared. After a few seconds of walking, all fourteen of the soldiers arrived at the garage. Inside, three transport hogs sat, ready to go. There were also several lockers filled to the hinges with extra weapons and ammunition. The Reds split up the hogs. Commander Schreiber and Master Chief took the first hog and loaded the passenger section with rocket launchers and ammo. Simmons and Richards took the second hog and were accompanied by Caboose and Bond. Their hog was filled with the smaller weapons and ammo for them. Everyone else rode in the third hog, and Andy even got his own seat, which was 'freaking awesome'. The hogs drove off and the Rhinoceros kept pace with them. After several hours of driving and running, they all finally arrived at the construction site. Everyone filed out, checking weapons and making sure every last clip was accounted for. After the weapons and ammo were distributed, Red Squad and Schreiber's men formed up in their original teams and began their patrols of the area. Master Chief, Schreiber, Lock-jaw, Andy and the Rhinoceros, who was still carrying the Blue Lieutenant, entered the Special Forces' temporary HQ. After the Chief and Schreiber explained everything to the Rhinoceros about their travels, he told them his story about his deployment, how he took down the BBW and how he ended up at the train station. The three discussed what their next move would be for hours, coming up with several possible options. Then, Donut came in over the radio; his voice was filled with trepidation.

"Master Chief? Sir, I have some very, very, very bad news."

"What is it, Donut?"

"Parker just had a visual, and you're not going to like what she saw."

"What was it?"

"I even had her double check, just to make sure. I couldn't believe what she said until I saw it for myself--"

"Private Donut, just tell me what you saw."

". . . It's Tex, sir. Tex is here."

To Be Continued

20. T3x

Chapter XX

_After the timely arrival of the Rhinoceros, the Red Team returned to their temporary HQ. The Master Chief, Commander Schreiber and the Rhinoceros were planning their next course of action when Donut revealed to the Chief that Tex, who had been seemingly killed twice, was at their location. . . _

The Chief slammed his fist down on the makeshift table leaving a dent in it. He walked over to a corner and stood there for a few seconds.

"You both know who Tex is, correct?"

"That's the country, isn't it?" the Rhinoceros asked. He had received a lot of information over the past few hours and was still trying to get everyone's name right.

"No, Rhinoceros that's Texas and Texas is a state, not a country. Tex is the . . . _thing_ that came back from the dead. Twice, apparently."

"Oh. Hey, I don't mean to distract you from this, but my name's Ryan. You don't have to keep calling me 'Rhinoceros'."

"Noted."

It was evident that the Chief was angry by the tone of his voice. He didn't mean to sound harsh, but he had put Tex down twice. Was he really killing her? Did she really die either time? The Chief knew in his mind the answer was 'yes', but he was now feeling something he had never felt before; inadequacy. He must be doing something wrong if she is able to rise from the dead, but what? Then the Chief realized something. The second time she appeared, she was in the laboratory under the Red Fortress where the data on the Flags' healing properties was kept. What if she got what she came for? What if she was being revived by the flag?

"Ok," the Chief said. His voice was no longer laced with bitterness, but with eagerness . . . and a hint of sadism. "We are going to capture her this time. You two remember what I told you about the Flag data Doc got from Battle Creek, right? Well, what if she has one of those receiver things inside her? She could just heal herself after every battle! If we find it, we can remove it. Tex will no longer be a problem."

"Sounds good to me," Ryan said. "Do I get to blow stuff up?"

"Probably not."

He made a disappointed grunt. "Count me out then."

"However, we will need you later for intimidation."

A grin appeared on Ryan's face. He had taken his helmet off earlier, disproving Caboose's statement that his horns were real and grew from his skull. Before the helmet came off, the Chief had agreed with him. Instead, the horn entered the helmet and created a protective pad around the forehead, reducing the force of cranial impacts greatly. The visor, which was a dark red color, was a new Red technology which allowed Ryan to cycle through regular vision, night vision and thermal vision. It was also equipped with two different levels of zoom, 5x and 20x. The helmet itself was as large as any regular soldier's torso, and the larger horn made it nearly two meters tall. Ryan himself was not naturally as large as he was. His massive size was a result of a super-soldier project where fifteen candidates were chosen to receive intensive augmentation to their bodies. The procedure bonded an indestructible metal to his bones and modified every other aspect of his being. It was like the Spartan II project with more advanced augmentation procedures. Unlike the Spartan II

program, Ryan was the only survivor.

"I'm not much of a goon, if that's what you mean, but scaring people seems to be one of my specialties. Holler when you need me."

Ryan left to go sharpen his horns. Schreiber, who had been sitting and listening to the conversation, stood and walked up to the Chief.

"What do you plan on doing to her?"

"Don't worry. I'm just going to ask a few questions."

"And if you don't get the answers you like?"

"Then we're going to have to get surgical, Commander. This is war, the end justifies the means."

With that, the Chief left the room and went to go intercept Tex. Schreiber was left alone. He thought about the Chief's words. _The end justifies the means_. The Chief didn't coin the phrase and Schreiber wasn't sure who did, nor did he really care at that point. The Chief was willing to do whatever it took to get the answers he wanted, and as long as the outcome was beneficial to humanity, he would have absolutely no regrets.

* * *

>The Chief entered the makeshift laboratory and saw Doc working on the broken nano-chip. He was conducting more research on the Electro-Magnetic waves to see if there were any more secrets he had yet to unlock. The Chief was about to say something when he saw a blur. It was nearly invisible, but the light reflected off of it at odd places giving it a humanoid look. It was moving slowly towards Doc. It crept closer to him and looked as though it was about to attack, but the Chief had other ideas. He leapt forward and punched the blur in its center, causing sparks to shoot out of a panel the Chief had just destroyed. Doc looked up in surprise as Tex materialized in front of the Chief out of thin air. <p>"We have to stop meeting like this," she said.<p>

"Maybe we should just stop meeting at all."

"You want to break up with me? I understand, but . . . I'm hurt."

The Chief rolled his eyes and went to punch her in the back of her head. She dodged the attack, but the Chief wasn't in the mood for fighting. He wanted answers. Tex lunged at him, but the Chief caught her fist in his hand and squeezed. Tex gasped as his grip tightened. Master Chief thought about what to do next when he remembered a movie that Donut had forced him to watch. It was about a British secret agent named 'Powers' who tried to stop the poorly formulated evil plots of 'Dr. Evil', who reminded the Chief of O'Malley. One of Powers' most often used techniques, if the Chief recalled correctly, was called the-

"Judo Chop!" the Chief cried out. He held his hand out with his fingers together and brought it down on Tex's neck. She moaned and fell to the floor unconscious.

"Wow, I can't believe that actually worked," the Chief said in amazement. "Doc, remind me to give Donut a promotion or something. And get me something to tie her up with."

"Here," Doc tossed him some sort of steel cord. It seemed durable enough, so the Chief slung it over his shoulder. Tex was put over his other shoulder and he made his way back to the briefing room. Tex was thrown into a chair. Her arms were tied behind her back and her legs were tied to the chair's legs. Ryan entered the room with his blades shining from a recent scrub. He put his massive helmet on his head and looked at Tex. The Chief removed her helmet and placed it on a table nearby. Slowly, Tex regained her consciousness and looked around the room. Her eyes fell on the Chief and she smiled.

"You got lucky, you bastard."

"That happens a lot."

"So, what is this, Red Army Police Department Headquarters? Am I being questioned?"

"We don't question people in the army. We interrogate them." He motioned to Ryan who stepped out from the shadows. Tex's sly expression quickly changed to one of fear. Her eyes opened even wider when the blades on his forearms extended. "And interrogation usually involves torture of some sort."

Tex looked from the Rhinoceros to the Chief.

"So am I going to die here?"

"Probably not, unless you're allergic to salt."

"What?"

"See, instead of tearing you open, I decided on a much crueller form of torture. My friend here is going to cut you and I'm going to put salt in your wounds every time we get an answer I don't like."

Tex laughed. "Salt? What, are you guys high or something?"

"Not anymore," Ryan mumbled.

"Let's get started. First question; who sent you after us?"

"Nobody sent me after you idiots, I was sent after whatever data you were finding about the flags."

"Who sent you then?"

"O'Malley."

"How did he manage to capture you?"

"I wasn't captured. Tex was captured."

The Chief sighed. He had heard enough riddles, but decided not to argue. Tex was being surprisingly acquiescent thus far, and hurting her could complicate things. The Chief decided to play

along.

"Alright, fine. How did O'Malley capture _Tex_?"

"Tex had just mopped up those idiotic Red and Blue Zealots at that icy place when the alien, CrunchBite, found a ship and started flying around. Tex and the others didn't know why the ship was important, and they never found out because Wyoming blew it up. Tex chased him into the fortress only to get beat down by O'Malley. The next thing Tex knew, her armor was gone and she was floating in some sort of tube with all kinds of wires attached to her body. O'Malley said something about her not having a choice about her service to him and said something about clones, which turned out to be a part of his evil plan; he cloned Tex. The first Tex clone was sent to Blood Gulch to take the Blue and Red Flags, but failed. The second one tried to take the data from the laboratory, but failed and I tried to take it from Doc, but failed. Now, here I am being interrogated by two clueless Reds. Can you let me go?"

"Not yet," the Chief said. "The clone story explains why you keep showing up, but why does O'Malley want the data we're working on?"

"He wants to see how you've come along researching the super laser function in the flag."

O'Malley thinks we're working on the super laser?

"Well, he's not going to find out, now is he?" the Chief decided to play along. No sense in telling a spy that they were working on something entirely different.

"I guess not. Now can you let me go?"

"No. How are you able to remember what the other two Tex clones saw? I can understand having the original Tex's memories, but--"

"The helmets we are given are equipped with cameras that record everything we see. After you defeated the first one, Wyoming was sent to retrieve the mission recording. The video feed shown to our subconscious minds and we see it as a memory. I have no memories from our second encounter because those idiots at Bettle Creek cremated my body and my armor. I was, however, shown a short recording from the security console in the Red Zealots' Fortress. It was only a few minutes long, but I was impressed. Turns out you killed her too. What a surprise."

"Hmm. That makes sense. I guess."

"So, can I go now?"

"Now why would we just let you go in the heart of our base? Aren't you programmed to be loyal to O'Malley?"

"No, and even if I was, he isn't the kind of 'master' one goes running back to."

"And what do I have as proof of this?"

Tex pulled her arms out from behind her back. The whole time, she had

been working on freeing her arms and had finally gotten them loose. She took her helmet in her hands, pulled out the mission recording and snapped it between her fingers. She put her helmet on the table again and crossed her arms across her chest.

"Also, O'Malley changed up all of his secret bases and passwords. If you were planning on using Doc to get into his Fortresses, let alone find them, you're outta luck. You need me to get you in there."

"And why do I need you? In case you haven't noticed, my friend here is more than capable of breaking us into O'Malley's lairs."

"Maybe," Tex looked Ryan over. "But are you willing to risk his life attacking places that have undetermined defenses? What if he was killed because somebody didn't have the proper Intel.? And who knows, maybe there's stuff in there that can't just be blown up or torn to peices."

The Chief sighed and shook his head. The guilt trip. Works every stinking time. "Ryan? Untie her legs. I hope I'm not making a mistake."

"Oh don't worry, Master Chief, I'll personally make sure that setting me free will be the best decision you ever made."

Tex got up, put her helmet on and walked away. The Chief sighed and turned on his radio.

"This is the Master Chief to all Red units, be advised; Tex is now to be seen as a friendly. I repeat, Tex is now a friendly, and I don't want to hear anything from any of you, Red Squad."

He turned and left the room. He bumped into Schreiber outside the door.

"So, you didn't have to kill her after all."

"No, I guess not."

"Don't you feel better?"

"I feel better that I didn't have to kill her. I feel bad about letting her stay."

Schreiber smiled and left the Chief alone outside the building. Tex had joined his squad. The rest of Operation: Red Rage was bound to be interesting.

* * *

>O'Malley emerged from his teleporter. It had taken him from his island fortress to his cold, frozen one embedded atop the highest mountain on the planet. He took several steps forward in his new body and looked at the surrounding area. There was snow as far as the eye could see. Luckily, the research and containment facility he was on had an internal thermal heating unit which kept the entire facility at a comfortable temperature. The snow melted before it even reached the ground. O'Malley's host body made it's own way down to the containment cells to check up on the progress of certain . . . weapons that were being held there. He didn't even have to control

his host body, as they had found something that was mutually beneficial to both of them. O'Malley could remember the conversation like it was yesterday . . . <p>"So you see, I only require your body for a short period of time until my own body is complete!" O'Malley laughed his evil, maniacal laugh.

"What do ya plan to do to me when yer done?" Sarge had asked him.

"Oh, I'll dispose of you, of course, but the quickness of your death depends on your level of cooperation." O'Malley remembered explaining to the Sarge. He was confused, even frightened at first.

"Well, now that we're livin in the same body, how about ya tell me what yer up to? I may be able to help, if the price is right . . ."

"You FOOL! I do not require your assistance! I only require your body so that I may use it to wreak havoc on the universe!"

"Are ya gonna kill people? Are ya gonna laugh with joy as ya see yer enemies eaten alive by horrible genetic experiments gone wrong? Are ya gonna utterly annihilate all of humanity, destroying civilization as we know it?"

"Yes, I plan do do all of those things many times." He laughed evilly. "I also plan to use my greatest weapon to wipe all life from existence! It will be marvelous! Oblivion on such a scale that it will be told throughout the ages! Victory will be MINE!" He began laughing maniacally again and carried on for almost a minute when Sarge interrupted.

"Wait just a minute! Destroying all life in the galaxy? That means my men!"

"Yes, they will be the first to go . . ."

" . . . including Grif!"

"Well, yes, all life means all life. Unless you're implying that Grif isn't alive."

"No, he's alive, the dirt bag. Well, if yer goal is ta kill Grif, then ya have my support, O'Malley."

O'Malley had considered telling Sarge that Grif would only be one out of trillions of beings across the universe that would die horrible, painful deaths, but decided to go along with his new host. The rewards to having mutual goals with Sarge could prove to be . . . rewarding.

"Yes, Biff is the one that I am after, for he has plagued my existence with . . . plagues and such. Everyone else dying is just an added side benefit."

Sarge sounded like he was crying.

_"O'Malley, yer the best parasitic AI a guy could ask fer. Ya hate the dirt bag so much ya can't even say his name right! And ya don't care about innocent lives being completely destroyed in the process!"

I think we're gonna git along just fine . . ."_

To Be Continued

21. Departure

Chapter XXI

_The Tex clone had been interrogated and decided to join the Master Chief upon her release. Phase Four had extended for a week after the encounter as Master Chief, Commander Schreiber and Tex planned their next move . . . _

During the final week of Phase Four, Red Command had extracted the Blue Lieutenant and had taken him in for interrogation. Tex had gone about socializing with the members of Red Squad while helping Master Chief determine the location of Tucker and Church.

"Why do you need to find them so badly?" It was the final day of Phase Four and Tex was tired of sitting around doing nothing.

"They were the last two people to encounter O'Malley that I have not been able to locate. Doc, Caboose and Andy are already members of our team and everything they knew about O'Malley was already passed on to me. However, Andy was rarely around O'Malley, Caboose was . . . well, you know, being himself, and Doc already divulged O'Malley's secret plans and base locations, which you explained are now obsolete. Tucker and Church might know some more information."

"Yeah, I bet they know a _ton_ of information." You could cut the sarcasm with one of Ryan's forearm blades.

"We still should make an effort to find them. You don't think O'Malley would send clones after them, do you?"

"I don't see why he would. The only reason he sent me after you was to steal your information on the Flag."

The Chief stood from the chair he was sitting in and paced the floor.

"We did discover that they were here, and that they moved west, but Red Command lost track of them. Have any ideas as to where they might be headed to? You have all of the original Tex's memories, so you would know how Church behaved and anything he told Tex."

"I wish I could help you on this one, Chief, but Church has never left that godforsaken canyon of his own free will, except for when O'Malley escaped. I could see why he and Tucker would leave the place since you guys were going to kill them, and I could see why they would come here, since this place has been abandoned for a while. As to where they went next, I have no clue."

"They received a transmission and headed west. The Office of Red Intelligence has monitored all Blue transmissions surrounding those two, but they never reported any orders telling them to move anywhere, so Blue Command is out of the picture."

The Chief sat down at the table again and looked at the map he had

been given. They were on the west coast of the continent and the only thing out there was hundreds of miles of water until the next continent. No hostile air travel had been reported, so they hadn't escaped across the planet. Then the Chief realized something.

"Tex, are you sure O'Malley abandoned all of his old bases?"

"Not _all _of them. You know how hard it is to come by abandoned fortresses these days? It's even harder to build them. He kept a few of the less obvious ones."

"Was one of his bases on an island?"

"Yeah, there was an island base. He called it Relic because it was one of the oldest structures on the planet. Blue Army architecture is actually quite nice, especially when--"

"What was it used for?"

"At first, it was his primary base where he built all sorts of doomsday weapons, but after a while, he started to use the giant repulsor lift to transport supplies into space where he began making a space station."

Master Chief sat back in his chair.

"My guess is that O'Malley is the one who called Tucker and Church," said the Chief. "They got the call and went to check it out. It's strange that ORI never recorded their flight, though."

"That's because there probably wasn't one. Relic is guarded by several Air Defense turrets so if they flew to the island, they would have been shot down."

"Wouldn't O'Malley just power them down to let them in?"

"The turrets are kept alive by energy siphoned from the solar particles that are collected by the repulsor lift. They can't be turned off; only destroyed. And they target any aircraft that enters the firing range."

"Why?"

"O'Malley gets around by using a teleportation grid that he has established. There's an old, burned down warehouse along the coast that he fixed up. It takes him to his main bases; Relic, Lockout, Containment and Colossus."

"Do you know where the warehouse is?"

"I think I could find it."

"Good. Get everyone in here; we need to have a final meeting."

"Alright, but I'm not your errand girl, Master Chief, remember that."

Tex walked out of the main level of the abandoned building. The dirt floor was surprisingly level and made for an excellent base to put

tables and chairs on. There was a door that led to a staircase and a ramp that was large enough for a ghost to drive up. The highest level opened out onto a walkway that was unfinished. There was a support beam that hung precariously from an old crane near it and a section of road was suspended in the air behind that. The building had made for an excellent briefing room, but its usefulness was coming to a close. The Chief looked around and saw Andy lying in a corner.

"What are you doing there, Andy?"

"I'm thinkin, Chief. I'm thinkin about what I should do with this thing I have here."

Andy's casing slid open to reveal a strange cylinder-shaped device. There was padding where a person would hold onto it . . .

"Look Andy, I know you don't like Tex, but if you give her that so she can--"

"Whoa, Chief, take it easy. This isn't a personal device for our newest member. I was thinkin about givin it to Lock-jaw."

"Why? What is it?"

"It's the key I told you about."

"The one that can be used like a sword?"

"Yeah, that's the one."

"You should give it to him. You two are friends, he'd love it."

"The problem is that I don't know what he'll do. I mean, he might try to go and start up that quest again. And you know what happened the last time anybody tried to go on a quest."

"Yes; CrunchBite died, Tex was captured, Tucker ran away like a little girl and Caboose carried you away not having a clue as to what was happening. I still want to check out that place. It's one of O'Malley's Fortresses and the Zealots said they found something there."

"Hey, it's your call. If you think I should give Lock-jaw the key, I will."

"He can't just carry you around with nothing to do all the time."

"I guess. Here, you give it to him, but do ****not**** turn it on. I cannot stress enough how important that is."

The Chief held the hilt of the sword-key in his hand. The activation button seemed a little out of reach for his thumb, but for Lock-jaw it would be easy to ignite the blade. The Chief put the sword-key on a clip on his belt.

"Thanks Andy."

"No problem."

Just then, everybody started to enter the base. Tex was the last one

in, making sure she got everyone.

"Everyone, I have some sad news. We're going to have to cut our get-together short. Operation: Red Rage is proceeding to Phase Five."

"Which is?" Grif asked.

"Phase Five was intended to locate O'Malley, but since Tucker and Church are still at large, they are the primary targets. We're also going to find out where O'Malley's bases are, which may give us a clue as to where the Blues and Sarge are. We start by locating a burned down warehouse. There are several that we know of thanks to Commander Schreiber, so those will be our first stops. Any questions? No? Good. Red Squad, listen up! I want you all ready to go in five minutes. Doc, you have ten. Make sure that gear is packed up tight."

With that, Red Squad said their goodbyes to Commander Schreiber's team and left to go pack for the trip. Master Chief walked up to Ryan,

"You're welcome to come with us, Ryan."

"Thanks, but no thanks Chief. I'm gonna hang around these clowns for a while. They need my help more than you do."

The Chief nodded and extended his hand. Ryan held out his finger and the Chief shook it. He turned to Schreiber.

"I guess this is so long for now."

"I guess so. We'll be keeping a close eye on you, Chief. Don't get into too much trouble."

"I'll do my best."

Schreiber patted the Chief on the shoulder and went to go prepare his Special Forces team for their next assignment. Master Chief walked outside. His squad had already assembled near two of the transport hogs and was making final checks on their gear. Lock-jaw appeared at the Chief's side.

"Lock-jaw, Andy wanted me to give this to you."

The Chief pulled the sword-key from its clip and handed it to Lock-jaw. The alien's eyes grew wide and he took it and examined it. Satisfied that it wasn't locked to the Chief or anyone else, he puffed his chest out and roared. The sword-key's blade came to life in his hand and Lock-jaw inspected it. He deactivated it and slung it on his own armor, then made a face at the Chief that he could only guess was a smile. The two made for the transport vehicles and were soon on their way. Phase Five had started.

* * *

>O'Malley walked through his cloning facility. Large containers filled with light blue, highly flammable nutrients were being processed by the facility's computers. The substance, dubbed O'Mallior, was proficient in growing his clones at hyper

accelerated rates, but if it came into contact with oxygen, it would explode with tremendous force. It was a risk he was willing to take.

The red armored host body stopped in front of one pod in particular. It contained the original Tex. She was completely conscious and aware of what was happening to her, but could do nothing about it. O'Malley realized that, after each sample of DNA he took from Tex, her health condition would decline at an alarming rate. To counteract this side effect, O'Malley had literally plugged hundreds of life-support devices into her back and head. Tubes had been forced down her throat and into her stomach to pump O'Mallior into her system to keep her alive. She would never be able to live without them, as her body had become dependant on the machines. Every day, Tex wished for death, but every day, her life was prolonged by some advancement in the machines. O'Malley would make sure that his unwilling cell donor would remain alive until he had his own body and every other living soul was wiped from the face of the earth.

O'Malley smiled through Sarge's mouth and moved to the pod next to Tex. While the bounty hunter looked terrifying and disgusting with all of the mechanical protrusions that jutted from her spinal column, the creature in the pod next to her would be the stuff of legend as far as terror went. Inside floated another body. It was also hooked up to life support systems, but not permanently. This body was the result of the combination from several different DNA samples taken from the smartest and strongest the Red and Blue armies had to offer. O'Malley made a mental note to thank Doc for his access to medical files and blood samples of every soldier in both armies. There were a few pieces for his biological puzzle that needed to be put in place, but he would have them. When he did, he would no longer require a host body. He would have his own.

To Be Continued

22. Frozen Containment

Chapter XXII

Red Squad had been traveling West for several days, examining every burnt down warehouse on their map searching for O'Malley's secret teleporter grid. After coming up empty with every examination, they were starting to doubt that the place existed at all . . .

"Tex, I'm starting to doubt that this place existed at all," said the Master Chief.

He drove the warthog down a dusty trail that led through a burned down attempt at a settlement. Every warehouse they went to previously was also burned down along with the surrounding attempt at a settlement. At first, it was creepy. Now it was getting old. The Chief made a few more turns and passed more old burned buildings and continued down a straight stretch of road. Dark, ominous clouds were forming overhead, and rain began to drizzle from up above, turning the dusty trail into a muddy one. The hog pulled up alongside the final burned down warehouse, followed by the other one. All ten soldiers filed out, grabbing their weapons and making sure they were loaded. Everyone followed the Chief as he walked up to the door slowly. He kicked it down and somersaulted into the room. His

maneuver was halted as his foot hit the ground and his other knee steadied himself. Two Sub Machine Guns were pointed forward at . . . nothing.

"Nice one, Chief," Tex said. She and the rest of the squad entered the burnt down facility nonchalantly.

Tex looked around the room. The warehouse was exactly the same to the other ones they had been in; small, dark, charred and empty. Completely empty. The Chief walked over to a wall and began searching for any sign of recent occupation.

"Sir, every single warehouse turned out the same results; absolutely nothing," said Grif. "What makes you think you'll find something here?"

The Chief's hand slid over a bump. It wouldn't have been so profound if the bump wasn't pulsating and glowing. The light was encased inside a black semi-transparent bulb, making the effect of a black light. The bump turned out to be a button. The Chief pressed it and four teleporters activated on the four sides of the room.

"I don't know, Grif. Maybe my years of experience in these sorts of things helped."

"Showoff," Grif muttered.

"Excellent work, Master Chief, I knew you'd find it eventually," piped Simmons.

"You are such a kiss ass."

"Shut up Grif."

"Shut up both of you! We found the teleporters, so let's get moving!"

Everyone moved out to secure the room and protect it from possible intruders. Master Chief walked up to one of the teleporters and saw a sign above it read 'Lockout'. He remembered that Lockout was the name of one of O'Malley's bases. The Chief inspected the other three and found that each one sported a similar identification. O'Malley was either ridiculously shortsighted or unbelievably ingenious. Either way, he had just shown them where his fortresses were. The Chief walked up to a teleporter marked 'Containment'.

"We'll start here," he announced.

Lock-jaw walked up beside him holding Andy.

"So, the Great Freezing Plains it is then," said Andy. "I've been dying to remodel the place ever since we first got there."

"Let's just hope this isn't a trap."

Tex was now standing at his other side.

"O'Malley is either watching your every move as we speak, or is utterly unaware as to our location. Knowing him, it's more likely the second one, and just a heads up about this place; really, really

fucking cold."

"Thanks. I'm glad you're here to make everything painfully obvious."

"Don't mention it."

"Alright everyone, listen up," the Chief called to Red Squad. "According to the lady, you're gonna freeze your asses off at this place, so make sure you got what you need to keep warm."

Everyone was ready to go in minutes and the Master Chief took a step through the teleporter. He emerged at the coldest, iciest place he'd ever been to. He knew he wasn't going to like it already. Everyone filed out of the teleporter behind him.

"Son of a bitch, Chief, this place is freezing!" Grif exclaimed.

"That's because it's nighttime, Private. I suggest we move into those caves and pitch camp. It might be a little less cold."

Everyone hastily moved into the tunnel carved out in the rock wall. The Chief zoomed in on the large fortress in front of him. It was strangely familiar, but the Chief couldn't put his finger on exactly how. He shrugged and went to catch up with the rest of his squad. To his surprise, most of them already had their tents set up. Grif, Simmons, Donut, Caboose, Doc, Lock-jaw and Lopez had their tents in a semi-circle facing in towards a fire that Lopez had started up. Tex's tent was a ways off, as she claimed to operate better alone. Andy sat near the fire as everyone gathered their skewers and began to roast an assortment of foods over the open flame. The talking explosive device began to recount the adventures he went on with Caboose, Tucker and CrunchBite, but the Chief was too tired to listen. The long days of driving were taxing, as inaction made him more tired then strenuous workouts or perilous battles. He entered his tent and removed his armor, setting it neatly aside. His tent kept almost all the warmth inside and left the cold outside. It was times like these that the Chief cherished; calm evenings where everyone was enjoying themselves in their own way. The Chief liked to update himself on the most recent Red Army reports and decided to look at those before he went to sleep.

He was reading about the Second Battle for Sidewinder when he heard the zipper to his tent open. He placed the data pad on the floor and waited for the intruder, only to see Tex's unarmored head peek through the open flap. She gave a small smile upon seeing he was alone and scuttled into the tent and the Chief saw she had a sleeping bag pulled up to her neck along with a large blanket. Tex zipped the 'door' behind her.

"I don't believe I gave you permission to enter, _Tex_."

"I don't believe I asked for permission, _sir_."

The Chief smiled to himself. Tex was about as respectful as Grif, although she shared none of his laziness. Tex scooted from the spot in the Chief's tent closer to him. Much closer.

"May I ask why you have decided to grace me with this unexpected

visit?"

"Your little band of soldiers has been roasting whatever they can find over that stupid fire for over three hours. Almost half of my food is gone because that alien pet of yours keeps turning invisible and stealing it from me."

"And you came over here because you want me to yell at them?"

"No, I came over here because it's really cold. That, and I was getting bored."

"Were you getting bored or lonely?"

"A little of both, I guess."

She moved even closer to the Chief, who suddenly remembered that he only had his blanket around his waist. He was about to say something when Tex wrapped her arms around his neck, bringing her blanket around, covering them both. The Chief could feel Tex's body pressing against his and realized that she only had her blanket as well. The warmth from Tex's body mixed with the Chief's and slowly heated the tent to a nice, toasty temperature. He moved back, resting his head on his pillow. One of his arms held Tex close to him and the other rested on his chest.

"You do realize," the Chief began, ruining the sensual moment, "that this is strictly for survival purposes."

"Chief, we're both naked and we're spending the night in the same tent under the same blanket. You can take your military protocols and shove em, I just want a warm place to sleep." Tex muttered. She rested her hand on top of the Chief's. "And keep your hands above the waist," she added groggily.

Master Chief grinned. He slowly drifted off to sleep.

* * *

>"Professor Burdick!" the eerie voice said behind him. <p>The middle aged man turned to see the red-clad warrior standing behind him. A shotgun sat in his hands in a relaxed position, but he knew that, with one piece of bad news, the gun could spell his death.<p>

Professor Justin Burdick of the Red Army Research and Development Corps had been hired by O'Malley to create new weapons to protect his fortresses. His unique and effective Air Defense turret design had landed him the position of Lead Scientist of Doom at O'Malley's weapon development laboratory on Relic. Well, it was partially his AD turret design. The other part was the fact that his predecessor, Professor Jason Jovenall, had failed to produce an adequate design for his super weapon and was fed a blast from the twelve-gauge shotgun. And that gun was uncomfortably close for Burdick's liking. He ran a hand through his jet-black hair, pushing it out of his large, unwieldy glasses.

"Yes O'Malley?"

"I require an update on the super weapon. When will it be

operational?"

Burdick didn't have a direct answer. When dealing with experimental weapons, one could never be sure of when they would be operational. Rather than risk his life, he gave his best answer.

"At least a month. Maybe longer."

"A month? A MONTH? Professor, Burdick, we don't have a month. We have weeks; maybe _days_ before those meddling fools from Red Squad discover our location. Even though they will inevitably die, they will give away our position! We can't hold off an entire armada, Professor. Not yet."

"O'Malley, if I might be so bold as to offer a suggestion?"

"Assuming it is one that will interest me, carry on."

"Perhaps we don't need to have the primary super weapon online as soon as possible. From what I understand, these installations you've scattered across the galaxy aren't powerful enough to create the devastation you so desire. Not yet, anyway. Perhaps we can push the primary super weapon back and release the . . . _other_ weapon you created."

"You want me to set them _lose_?"

"Indeed. If they spread as rapidly as our researchers have estimated, most life in the galaxy will be destroyed by the time we are ready. It would be most interesting to observe their actions in an uncontrolled environment. It would also give us time to strengthen the super weapon. Besides, when the super weapon is fired, they'll die along with everyone else."

"Hmm. Perhaps you have a point. I can arrange for them to be released, but not until I can be assured that the primary weapon will be operational. It would be like letting a flood loose and not having any dams to stop it."

"Of course, sir. If we were able to get our hands on that flag data, the month I mentioned earlier would be reduced to several days."

"Leave that to me."

"With all due respect, you aren't planning on sending out one of those worthless Tex clones, are you?"

"What if I was?"

"I think it is time to try a different approach. The Tex clones have failed you thrice."

"True, true. What did you have in mind?"

Burdick brought up a display screen that showed a live video feed from the Lockout Research facility. In one of the containment cells, a large collection of orange worms were squirming about, hungrily looking for something to devour.

"You want to drown them in pumpkin pie?"

"No, O'Malley, these creatures were just discovered on a planet out in the Tomato System."

"A Red-controlled system, no doubt. Why do those fools insist on naming their controlled systems after objects that are the same color as they are? Anyway, what do these creatures do?"

"They are very primitive worms, but they gather together to form a single collective consciousness. It is incredible. We placed a group inside a standard soldier's armor, and it moved about as though it was a human being!"

"Yes, very impressive. You don't mean to tell me that this is what you hope to hold those fools off with, do you?"

"No, of course not. As you know, we have also been researching new types of armor with mind control devices implanted inside them. One suit design was already tested on a worm colony."

"And? What were the results?"

"The mind control device worked flawlessly, O'Malley. The creature obeyed every command we sent to it. It even went so far as to ignore our commands only to provide a faster and more efficient solution."

"Is it still inside the armor?"

"It cannot be removed."

"Show me where you're keeping it."

Burdick tapped another button and a different screen came up. It showed a large bipedal creature encased in a shiny, blue-grey armor. The top was shaped like a dome with an opening at the top where an exposed section of the worms connected the dome to a smaller blue dome that had two black ovals on either side. The small dome was the head, the orange section was the neck and the large dome was the torso. There were two opening on either side of the torso where supposed arms emerged. The one on the left was encased in a flexible black casing that protected the vulnerable orange flesh beneath. The arm ended with three large claws. The right arm was wrapped similarly, but instead of a hand a strange, plasma-based cannon finished off the appendage. Along the back of the torso, several razor-sharp spines swayed back and forth. There was another section of exposed orange, which was the waist, and a triangular piece of armor connected the small midsection to the lower half of the body. The legs were encased in the same material as the arms, but the shins were plated with the blue-grey armor for added protection. The feet ended in massive boots that were as longer than a soldier's torso. The whole thing stood over eleven feet tall.

"What do you call these creatures, Professor Burdick?"

"Since they were created to find and kill your enemies, we have translated the word _hunter_ into an ancient language. These creatures are called _Lekgolo_."

To Be Continued

23. What Lies Beneath

Chapter XXIII

_Red Squad managed to find the correct burned down teleporter nexus and decided to investigate Containment first. Night had fallen; Red Squad had set up camp and prepared to move out the next day . . .

—

"Hey Chief, wake up!"

Master Chief opened his eyes. It was still dark out.

"What time is it?"

"Seven in the morning, Chief. We should get moving."

"Right, let me just—" the Chief turned to grab his armor, but found it wasn't there. "Tex, where's my armor?"

"Hmm? Oh, I already put it on you."

The Chief looked down at his hands. Sure enough, his gauntlets were secure on his hands. The rest of his armor felt snug and comfortable.

"Thanks. And, Tex? About last night . . ."

"Don't worry about it. I didn't do anything to you."

The Chief nodded, feeling embarrassed. He went to exit the tent.

"Oh, and Chief?"

"Yeah?"

" . . . nice ass."

Master Chief chose not to respond, but rather made his way out of the tent and looked around. Nothing had changed since the day before; the snow and ice was still there, and cold winds only served as a harsh reminder. Even with the MJOLNIR armor's temperature adjusting function, he could still feel it. The large Fortress was only a few dozen yards away, so the Chief decided it wouldn't be too hard to get there.

He pondered what might lie beyond the metal gates. Something to stop O'Malley with? Or something that would destroy them all? It didn't matter; the Chief was going to find out. He turned to see the rest of the squad exiting their tents. Everyone seemed to have gotten a good night's sleep. Suddenly, Lock-jaw appeared in front of him. He was holding Andy.

"Master Chief, Lock-jaw just scouted the Fortress. He says there's a door that looks like it can be melted by his key, but he doesn't want

to do anything until everyone's there."

"The squad's almost ready. We'll leave as soon as everyone gets their stuff together."

It took only several minutes to assemble their gear and they were off again. Lock-jaw opened the old, rusty gate with his sword-key and they made their way across a small expanse of snow and ice and through the gate. As soon as everyone was within the walls of the Fortress, the gate slammed shut. Lock-jaw led them into a room and turned left. After a few more feet, he stopped outside a wall with odd, intricate patterns engraved on it.

"So, this is the door?" the Chief asked nodding towards the odd formation in the otherwise smooth wall.

Lock-jaw blarged.

"Ok, we're all here, go ahead and melt this thing."

Lock-jaw activated his energy sword-key and easily cut through the metal. The door fell into a large hallway that sloped down into the ice and rock. The metal was the same as the outside, but looked like it was kept in good shape as it wasn't rusty or old like the machinery outside. Master Chief took point and led his Squad into the lair below . . .

* * *

>O'Malley had been observing the Lekgolo for most of the night as it was pitted against scores of soldiers and defeated all of them with ease. The only weapon that seemed to be able to inflict damage was the rocket launcher, but if the specimen was ever wounded, it was given O'Mallior and its wounds were healed. The evil AI had been wondering where to release his new monster, but had been unable to come up with a suitable foe. The location of the Master Chief and his band of ragtag soldiers was currently unknown. Even if he knew where they were, he wouldn't send his monster after them. There would be no challenge; the Lekgolo would die from boredom. Suddenly, an idea came to mind. <p>"Burdick! Find the location of those fools from the Red Army Special Forces that have that Rhinoceros fellow with them."<p>

"Already done, sir,"

"Send our pet there post haste. I want to see how the Lekgolo does against the Rhinoceros."

"Of course, sir."

O'Malley called up Wyoming on Sarge's radio.

"Wyoming, I have a task for you . . ."

* * *

>Red Squad had been descending into the Fortress for almost five minutes. The Chief was wondering if the hallway ever stopped, and his question was answered as a landing became visible. It was a small landing, only about ten meters across and five meters out. Once

everyone exited the hallway, however, the Chief was able to see how enormous the rest of the room was. The ceiling wasn't even visible, and clouds formed over head. The room was longer than twenty football fields put together. The metal ended several feet away from the landing and gave way to grass. Most of the room resembled a large plain, complete with rolling hills and even a lake. There was a light source that allowed for all of this, but it wasn't discernable through the cloud cover. Suddenly, the clouds began to pour forth rain. <p>"What the hell is this place?" Grif spoke for everyone.<p>

"If I knew, I'd tell you," the Chief replied in a daze. He snapped out of his stupor and looked around. There was a small repulsor lift that led up to a walkway. The Chief walked up to it and stepped in. He was lifted into the air as the strange magnetic properties pushed against his body. He landed on the walkway and looked down. He was twenty meters off the ground and had a nice view of the place. The walkway went along the bowed, curved wall, which disappeared in the fog that had formed. His squad had followed him up and they proceeded slowly until they reached a door. The Chief stepped in front of it and it slid open, revealing a laboratory. There were no cages holding animals, or beakers filled with vile liquids. There were, however, several unfinished machines. The front looked almost crablike while the back ended in a wide array of different mechanical parts, but the Chief could see no legs. There were no wheels either, so he concluded that the robots would fly if they were completed. After walking around, he saw that some of the robots had been destroyed rather than uncompleted, and several laid on the floor, blown to pieces. Beyond several other tables and destroyed robots, the Chief saw what must have been fighting them. Fifteen dead scientists were lying on the ground. Clean cuts crisscrossed their bodies as a result of some strange laser weapon. He wasn't sure why they were dead, or if the robots had even killed them. Then he saw an optical recording device attached to the head of one of the felled scientists. He reached behind the man's head and removed the small chip from the slot in the recording device. He inserted it into his own helmet and watched as the last several weeks of the scientist's life played out before his eyes . .

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**PetrucciJ./1138.08.02.1989-71-64/August4.3599/parasite-inf.testfacility. PLAY **

"_Here we are with day one already coming to a close. I'm here with my friends and colleagues. This is Harman Kardon,"_

The view showed a tall, muscular man with black hair, dark brown eyes, a large nose and a small moustache. He nodded towards the camera.

"_Gina Pavilion,"_

The view focused on a petite girl no older than twenty five years old. Her auburn hair was tied into a bun that sat neatly atop her head. She wore half moon glasses and was reading through a hefty stack of papers. She didn't even look up at the mention of her name.

"_and Amy Nozirev."_

Now the view showed a striking woman, at least in her mid thirties. Her hair was platinum blonde and cut to shoulder length. She was a voluptuous, well toned woman who wasn't as stuck-up as her female co-worker since she waved with a happy smile on her face when the cameraman said her name.

"_Of course, there's me, Jacob Petrucci. We're here to see what this parasite that O'Malley's scientists created can do. Today we were supposed to get acquainted with the other staff. We'll be here a while, and tomorrow, we get to study some of them! This is going to be awesome."_

**PetrucciJ./1138.08.02.1989-71-64/August4.3599/parasite-inf.testfacility. FF
**

**PetrucciJ./1138.08.02.1989-71-64/August10.3599/parasite-inf.testfacility. PLAY **

"_Hello there, me again. We've been going over the data about how the little ball critters infect their hosts and we found that the parasite doesn't completely render the host useless; we picked up brainwaves from the host of one of those forms with the tentacles. The little bugger in his chest was trying to communicate with him! Fascinating!"_

"_You say that about every stupid thing they do." The voice belonged to Miss Nozirev._

She walked up to Petrucci and her face got very close to the camera. Her eye was level with it, and the Chief decided that they had kissed. Relationships were forbidden in all branches of the military, including research. Maybe O'Malley loosened the reins a bit.

"_I only say it because it's true."_

**PetrucciJ./1138.08.02.1989-71-64/August10.3599/parasite-inf.testfacility. FF
**

**PetrucciJ./1138.08.02.1989-71-64/August19.3599/parasite-inf.testfacility. PLAY **

"_We just set several of those little ball things into the experimentation field. O'Malley wanted to see the effects they had on the environment. We set a few animals loose, none of which had ample calcium stores to sustain the parasite. However, the little bastards found a way to assimilate them. The infection forms took over their bodies like any other host, but this time, the bodies swelled up and became bloated sacks. Then, the sacks began giving off this weird gas. In hours, the air became a sickly greenish brown color and these odd trees started sprouting up all over the place. We were ordered to vent oxygen into the field, and seconds after we did, the air returned to normal, the trees died and the bloated sacks shriveled up. We'll continue with this research for the next few days."_

**PetrucciJ./1138.08.02.1989-71-64/August19.3599/parasite-inf.testfaci

lity. FF
**

**PetrucchiJ./1138.08.02.1989-71-64/August30.3599/parasite-inf.testfaci
lity. PLAY **

"_O'Malley just told us that we are to stop testing the parasite. He
has all the information he wants and now he wants to find a way to
kill them. It's a shame; those critters were really fascinating to
watch."_

**PetrucchiJ./1138.08.02.1989-71-64/August30.3599/parasite-inf.testfaci
lity. FF
**

**PetrucchiJ./1138.08.02.1989-71-64/September5.3599/parasite-inf.testfa
cility-end. PLAY **

"_After getting all the parts and help we needed from O'Malley, we
were able to build a robot with enough fire power to cut down even
those monsters with the tentacles. I call it the Sentinel. It uses a
high powered beam of pure energy that can burn through virtually any
substance. We got enough parts that we were able to make a ton of
these things! I'm going to activate this one."_

Jacob walked up to the robot.

"_Activate," he said._

_The robot shuddered and floated off the table. Lights blinked on and
off indicating it was working properly._

"_Sentinel, there are parasite forms out in the experimentation
field; destroy them."_

_The Sentinel gave no reply, but flew out of the room accompanied by
a few others. Several minutes later, the robots reentered the room.
There were a few nicks on their armor plating, but they looked fine
otherwise._

"_Sentinels, deactivate."_

"_Negative," one replied._

"_What?"_

"_In order to eliminate unnamed parasite, all potential host forms
must be eliminated as well."_

"_What? NO! **NO**!"_

_Sounds of energy beams cutting through the air and connecting with
human flesh could be heard. Screams of agony echoed through the
laboratory as all the scientists there were burned to death by the
Sentinel robots. Gunfire could be heard, but after a loud wail of
pain, they stopped as well. Jacob was still alive and grabbed a
handgun from the holster of one of his fallen comrades. He flipped
over on his back where an energy beam had struck, aimed and fired at
the last Sentinel. It fell to the floor and exploded in a shower of
sparks. Jacob's head fell back and static filled the

screen._

****PetrucciJ./1138.08.02.1989-71-64/September5.3599/parasite-inf.testfacility-end.unexpectedtermin.atsource-KIA.****

Master Chief took the chip out of his helmet, stowed it and turned to face his squad.

"These scientists were under the employ of O'Malley. They were experimenting on a parasitic life form he created. They were all killed by these robot Sentinels. If you see one and it's moving, take it down."

Nobody said anything, but they all nodded. The Chief moved through the laboratory searching for something else about this parasite. There was something painfully familiar about all of this, but he didn't know what. There were no memories or anything else to give him a clue either. After finding nothing else of use in the laboratory, the Chief and his squad decided to head topside. Once free from the strange facility below, Lock-jaw used his sword-key to fuse the door shut again to keep any future visitors out . . . and whatever might have still been alive in. The squad made their way to a nearby teleporter. The Chief took one last look around, trying to get even a scrap of a memory. When nothing came to mind, the Chief hung his head stepped through the green vortex. It took them back to the warehouse.

To Be Continued

24. Conflict

Chapter XXIV

_Red Squad had entered the Containment Fortress and discovered a massive environmental testing facility. All of the researchers had been killed by Sentinel robots, which were also destroyed. After leaving the strange place, they arrived back at the warehouse . . .

—

"Wow. That was totally unexpected, but it was really, really unexciting," Grif said. After spending all that time at Containment he had thought the teleporter would take them somewhere different. He was wrong.

"Well, it saves us the trouble of walking through God knows how many miles of frozen tundra to get back here, so I'd say it's plenty exciting," the Chief replied.

After he stepped away from the teleporter, Master Chief looked at the other labeled teleporters. Relic, Lockout and Colossus were left.

"Tex, you know anything about Lockout?"

"Only that it's a small facility built somewhere up in the mountains. Not sure what mountains though. Or how high up."

"Well, we might be in for more cold weather. Everyone, we're moving out again. Prepare for more cold temperatures."

He was answered by groans of disappointment. His disciplined band of soldiers sounded like a bunch of school kids who were taking a pop-quiz. The Chief would have none of that.

"Hey, at least we're getting it out of the way. We have a heated facility and a tropical island left on the list. After staying there, do you really want to go back to the cold?"

At that, everyone picked up their gear and trotted over to the teleporter.

"That's better. Let's go."

The Chief stepped through the teleporter and found himself looking out over a snowy mountaintop. What was apparently the Lockout Fortress could be seen below, and all that stood between Red Squad and the Fortress was a steep slope covered in ice that went on for a half a mile. The rest of the squad exited the teleporter behind him.

"We're setting up camp here, people," the Chief announced. It was night, and the extreme cold could kill them. "We'll hit our destination tomorrow."

* * *

>Wyoming's one-manned stealth ship gently touched down in a forest. The bounty hunter exited the craft and passed through the dense foliage. Several yards ahead, there was a large wall and the man began to climb it. Behind that wall were the Red Army Special Forces and their secret weapon. Wyoming stopped on the way up and checked his gun; the tranquilizer darts were full and ready for firing. He wasn't sure why O'Malley didn't just have him knock out everyone and return the Rhinoceros to his Lockout Fortress, but he didn't question orders, especially with his pay. Wyoming's objective was clear; incapacitate the Red Army Special Forces and leave the Rhinoceros alone. If Wyoming did his job, which he always did, he would have front row seats to what was shaping up to be a very interesting show. Wyoming had reached the top of the wall and had made his way on top of one of the uncompleted buildings. His sniper was brought up and he aligned the targeting reticule with his first victim. <p>Like shooting fish in a barrel he thought.

* * *

>Red Squad had set up their camp in a similar fashion to the previous night, with everyone's tents facing towards a fire and the Chief's tent out of the way. This night, however, there was one less thermally sealed enclosure. <p>Master Chief skimmed through the casualty figures for the Siege of Rose Three, a planet in a Red-controlled system. The Blue forces had been beaten mercilessly. The Chief glanced over at Tex, who was polishing her battle rifle. Since the MJOLNIR armor was too large to allow for two people to comfortably fit inside the tent, both soldiers had removed their suits and placed them in an unoccupied corner. And, since neither of them needed to wear any sort of underclothing to prevent chafing, as was Donut's case, both of them were sitting within a foot of the other completely naked, save for a thermally insulated sleeping bag and a few blankets. Despite his repressed sexual drive as a direct

result of his augmentations, the Chief couldn't help but glance down at Tex's exposed chest. She had become so involved with cleaning her gun that she had let her blanket slip out from under her arms and fall around her waist, revealing more of her slender body. The Chief looked away, but Tex had seen him.<p>

"Go ahead and stare, Chief, that's what they're there for."

"I shouldn't."

"You should, Chief, you really should," she said turning her full attention to him. "You're a battle hardened soldier and you look like a ghost. Here you are with a naked woman in your tent and you decide to read the news." She pointed to the data pad.

The Chief felt his temper flare.

"You're right; I am a battle hardened soldier. I've seen billions of people killed before my eyes, trying to fight an enemy that couldn't be stopped. For every small victory we had, we lost an entire system. That fighting took some of my best friends' lives, but I wasn't able to mourn their death. I couldn't, because I was a Spartan, and Spartans can't afford to have things like emotion. They have to be able to focus, to complete the mission, because at the end of the day, that's what matters most. I'm as pale as a ghost because I've died a little inside each time I lost someone I cared about, and each time I did, I wasn't allowed to show it. It would kill the rest of me if any of you died. We're like family. After I lost my first one, I thought I'd never get a second chance . . ."

Tears silently fell from his eyes. Memories he thought he's never have to bring up were unleashed in a single moment of anger. His squad, his family, killed at the hands, claws and teeth of the unstoppable enemy that had torn through the galaxy like a juggernaut. All of them had died in that final, futile battle to save Earth's last stronghold. He was the last Spartan. He lost his family.

Tex wiped a tear from her own eye.

"Chief, I'm sorry, I . . . I had no idea . . ."

"No, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have snapped at you."

Tex looked at the Chief as he tried to fall asleep, but the memories of his dead brothers and sisters would keep him awake for most of the night. Tex leaned back against her pillow and decided against snuggling up to the man. She pulled her blanket up to her chin and fell asleep feeling guilty for causing the Chief so much pain in such a short time.

* * *

>Commander Schreiber had decided to move his troops to a Red Army testing facility that had recently come under attack by Blue forces. The Reds were holding their own, but the supply line was cut off. It would only be a matter of time before the Red forces ran out of ammunition and were defeated. Schreiber had just finished making the preparations to depart when he saw Weller grip her neck in pain and crumple to the ground. He was already checking for the source of the problem when Gonzalez gripped his neck in a similar manner and fell.

Parker, Richards and Bond followed suit. Schreiber pulled out his sniper and was trying to find the assailant when he felt something bump into his neck. Suddenly, pain rocketed through his throat and spread to the rest of his body. He fell to the ground and passed out.<hr>Wyoming looked through his sniper's scope to make sure all of his targets were down. After he was positive, he contacted O'Malley on his radio.

"O'Malley? This is Wyoming. I have done as you have asked, and I am awaiting further orders."

"Excellent work, Wyoming. Are the cameras in place as well?"

"Yes sir. I even took the liberty to set up additional cameras, if that suits your fancy."

"Indeed it does, my friend. Soon, we shall see if my pet was worth all the effort put into it."

"I would also like to thank you for allowing me to witness these events personally. I will enjoy every second of it."

"Hmm, yes. Of course. Anyways, when the first combatant dies, neutralize the other and my men will bring it to the Lockout Fortress."

"As you wish."

Wyoming cut the connection before O'Malley could respond. He had hoped his extra efforts and flattery would get him a bonus, but he was denied it, as usual. Turning his attention away from himself, he peered down the barrel of the rifle and saw the Rhinoceros try to find what had taken his comrades down. A monster clad in blue-grey armor, almost the same height as the Rhinoceros, stepped out from behind a building and roared in the man's direction. The Rhinoceros decided that the creature was responsible for felling his fellow soldiers and roared back. The monster and the Rhinoceros lunged at each other, and Wyoming cursed himself for not having brought popcorn.

To Be Continued

25. Discoveries

Chapter XXV

_Master Chief and Red Squad decided to depart for the Lockout Fortress located ridiculously high up in the mountains while O'Malley sent his pet after the Rhinoceros. Braving icy cold temperatures, Red Squad set out towards the facility in hopes of locating Church and Tucker . . . _

Master Chief stopped again and turned around. He checked to make sure everyone was following him and continued on his way. They would have reached the Fortress by now, but the path was slippery and cold winds blew snow in all directions. They were three fourths of the way there and had picked up the pace in order to reach the Fortress before they became human meat-sickles. At long last, the Chief made the final head count and gathered everyone around him.

"Alright, we're going in. Grif, you cover us from up here until everyone has made it to the Fortress, then get down there yourself. Everyone else; let's move."

Master Chief took out a stake. Normally, he would just slam into the ground, attach his rappelling wire to it and begin his descent, but this was ice, and different measures were needed. The stake in the Chief's hand was a new invention. It ran on battery power to heat up thermal coils inside the stake, allowing it to simply slide into an icy surface. The Chief stuck his into the ground and attached the wire to it. He made sure everyone else did the same and made sure Andy was secure on his belt.

"This is gay, Chief. You should just throw me down there and let me take care of everyone," the disgruntled explosive said.

"And let you have all the fun? Not a chance," the Chief replied.

Everyone began to descend the sheer, icy wall and made it to the Fortress without incident. After Grif arrived, the Chief began to assess where they were. They had arrived at some sort of platform that oversaw most of the upper level of the facility. There was a ramp behind them that broke off to the left and the right. There were also strange almost cylindrical crates that had blue, glowing centers. The Chief looked off the platform and saw no activity. Was everyone here killed, like at the facility under the Containment Fortress? Or were all the personnel on the lower levels of the facility? There was only one way to find out.

"Grif, get a silencer on that thing, take out anyone that so much as blinks in your direction. Simmons, you cover him. Everyone else, with me."

Grif got busy attaching his silencer to the long barrel of his sniper while Simmons surveyed the area, making sure nobody caught them off guard. Master Chief decided to go down the ramp on the right. He arrived at the bottom of the ramp and saw that he was in another room. There were no people in the area, so he fanned his team out. They covered doors and windows, looking for possible hostiles. After several minutes of uneventful surveillance, the Chief was summoned over to Lopez.

"What is it?" the Chief whispered.

Lopez simply pointed down. From his vantage point, he could see several scientists dressed in heavy lab coats. Some had earmuffs and gloves. They walked in pairs and went about, checking various panels on the wall. Those panels kept the entire Fortress at a nice seventy degrees, but the frigid cold made it so that only the facility itself was warm. The air around it was freezing. After watching for several moments, the Chief decided that, if there was anything of importance in the facility, it was down there. The Chief began to search for a ramp or stairwell that would take them to the lower levels. His search ended abruptly when he almost plummeted through an opening in the floor. The opening was against a wall and the hatch covering it had been opened. The Chief activated the squad-wide channel.

"Listen up; this hole leads to the lower section of the facility."

There might be another way down, but this is the fastest way we have. Be careful, there are scientists down there and they're in pairs. If you need to shoot, be absolutely positive that it's a headshot. We can't have people screaming and give away our position. Let's move."

The Squad quickly dropped into the hole. As soon as the last Red dropped through the hole, the Chief saw two scientists exit a doorway. They were talking and didn't notice them at first. Of course, the Master Chief only acted on 'at firsts' and plugged both of them in the head with his silenced M6D. Since there was no place to hide the bodies, the Chief tossed them off the walkway and into the abyss. He didn't want to think about how far down it was to the bottom, but he knew that plenty more of the scientists under O'Malley would meet similar fates.

* * *

>The Rhinoceros tried to push the monster back, but it was surprisingly strong and didn't give. The battle had been going on for almost an hour and both of the combatants were locked in a stalemate. Neither could seem to find a way to use their unique advantages to fell the other, and had resorted to using brute strength. Now, Ryan's hands were pushing against the creature's hands, or, against its one hand and the cannon. Both were trying to topple the other, but neither was going down. Ryan decided to do something unexpected. He fell back, still holding onto the creature's limbs and tossed it into a building behind him. He continued to roll backwards until he was on his feet again. Ryan turned and smiled as he saw the creature lying on the ground in a pool of orange blood. A piece of debris had fallen loose when the creature crashed into the building it was thrown into and it had landed in the soft orange spot on its back. <p>Wait a second; the orange stuff is a weak spot? Ryan looked at his chest where a ball of green plasma had hit him. It burnt through several layers of his armor and had charred the skin beneath. He had a chance to strike it then, but was unaware of that particular feature. He cursed himself for not being observant and charged towards the monster, this time knowing where to strike. The creature tried to stand, but shrieked in pain as Ryan's large cranial horn stabbed into the soft spot on its back. He flung his head up, dislodging the creature from his horn. It sailed up in the air and began to fall back to the ground. The creature's body smacked into the support beam that was suspended in the air by a crane on one of its sides, slowing its fall. Ryan wasted no time in attacking again and ran around to the other side of the support beam. He leapt in the air and grabbed the side that was elevated and pushed it down. Hard. The creature flew off the other side of the beam and crashed into the building next to it, knocking down a section of the wall. Ryan walked through the hole and saw the creature lying on the ground in a daze. He walked up to it and grabbed its armored head, pulling it past its natural limitations. He extended one of his forearm blades and held it to the creature's neck.

"Sorry I can't play longer, but I need to be ****head****ing out now," Ryan said as he decapitated the creature.

It gave one last cry of pain and its body fell to the ground. Ryan walked out of the building through the hole and began to make his way over to Schreiber and the others to see if they were Ok when he felt something hit him in the back of his neck. He ignored it, but then

pain shot through his neck and spread to the rest of his body. Ryan fell to the ground, trying to fight the painful feeling. It subsided eventually, but was replaced by an inexplicable feeling of drowsiness. Ryan didn't object, as he was tired from the battle. He closed his eyes and drifted off.

* * *

>The Chief surveyed the area. Grif had confirmed five kills from his position and the Chief and his team had counted ten. Master Chief was now in a room that was connected to the rest of the facility by two walkways. One went across into another room and the other one led out into the cold to a platform, which led even lower into the facility. Most of Red Squad was in the room with the last two scientists, who were tied up for questioning. The Chief looked them over. <p>"So, what is this place?" he asked, looking around and pretending to be interested.<p>

"Why should we tell you?" one of the scientists asked.

"Let's just put it this way. You answer my questions, and you get to live. You don't answer my questions and you'll have wished you brought a parachute."

The two scientists looked at each other; the fear was obvious in their faces. They returned their gaze to the Master Chief.

"This place is a facility where we housed various genetic experiments O'Malley created or found and enhanced."

"What is here currently?"

"We have several parasite infection forms and a few hapless soldiers. O'Malley has an extra large holding cell, but we don't know what he's planning on putting there."

"What side are the soldiers on?"

"Blue."

"How many are there?"

"Two, why?"

"Hey, I'm the one asking the questions here."

The Chief pondered the information he had received. Two Blues? The Chief had his suspicions and decided it was worth looking into.

"Where are they being held?"

"Just find a walkway that takes you down. The lowest level is where they're being kept."

"Thanks."

Red Squad turned and began to leave.

"Hey, wait!" the scientist called after the Chief. "What about

us?"

"I said I'd let you live, not let you go."

The Reds were already making their way down into the lowest level of the base. Once they arrived there, they saw what appeared to be a large, light blue energy field. At first, the Chief thought it was a repulsor lift, but upon closer scrutiny, it was revealed to be a holding cell. It must have been the extra large one that was awaiting its occupant because it was empty. The Chief turned around and saw a room that was glowing green. Holding cells lined the walls. Several scientists were monitoring the cells, but never finished as Lock-jaw crept up behind them and snapped their necks. Everyone moved around the room to secure the area while the Chief, Doc and Caboose entered the green room. The Chief stopped and looked into the first cell on his left. What appeared to be a mass of living pumpkin innards was squirming around. He moved to the next cell where he could barely make out several small shapes swimming about. Another cell held more of the swimming shapes. The Chief was about to move on to the next cell when Caboose shouted.

"Transistor Reef!"

"Caboose, we need to have a serious talk about names and rank."

"I found them!"

"Found who?"

"Church and Tucker! I found Church and Tucker!"

To Be Continued

26. Decision

Chapter XXVI

Master Chief and Red Squad had arrived at the Lockout Fortress and found Church and Tucker in containment cells. The Rhinoceros had defeated the Lekgolo and O'Malley's men had extracted him from Headlong. The escort forces would arrive at the fortress and, unless the Chief got Red Squad out of there, they would be trapped . .

.-

"Excellent work, Caboose," the Chief said.

He looked at the two cells before him. One held a soldier in cobalt armor, the other one in teal; Private Church and Private Tucker.

"Doc, can you get them out?"

"Yes, it'll only take a few seconds . . ." Doc tapped several buttons on the panels that operated each cell. The green liquid keeping them unconscious was slowly drained and the soldiers were awakened. Tucker coughed and spat some sort of green-grey slime out of his throat and stepped out of the cell. Church, being a spirit in a robot body, was able to skip the coughing and get right to the 'stepping out' part.

"Whoa . . . what the fuck?" Private Church looked around. Apparently his ghostly self was unconscious and his robot body was deactivated during his time inside the cell since he acted as though he had been incapacitated. "Where the hell am I?"

"Don't you mean 'where the hell are we?' " asked Private Tucker.

"No, because I could care less where you are." Church looked away from Tucker and seemed to notice the other three soldiers for the first time. "Who the hell are you supposed to be?"

"I am the Master Chief. This is Private Michael J. Caboose and this is Medical Officer Dufresne. We are Red Army operatives and require information from you."

"Doc and Caboose aren't Red Army operatives, what the hell are you talking about?"

"Private Church, if you want to live to possibly escape this facility, I strongly suggest you answer my questions. You are the only two soldiers from the Blue outpost at Blood Gulch who may have information we need. Caboose was outside of your base when O'Malley was there, Andy was being used by the Red Squad's Sergeant to translate a recording and Dufresne was busy delivering Tucker's baby. You two are the only ones who had actual contact with him, correct?"

"Tucker was not pregnant! That doesn't even make any sense! Anyway, I was the only one who talked to O'Malley."

"According to Caboose, O'Malley only agreed to allow Doc to help Tucker in return for something, but he didn't tell you what it was until you agreed to his terms. What exactly was the object that he wanted?"

"He wanted me to put all of the Blue Army biological research on a disc. I was trying to burn the information to a CD, but I accidentally made two. I kept the second one with me."

Church reached into one of the ammo pouches on his waist and pulled out a small disc no bigger than his thumb. Master Chief swiped it from his hand and placed it in one of the small terminals in his helmet.

"Hmm, let's see . . . bombs filled with gasses . . . night vision contacts . . . field manicure kits . . ."

The Chief reached the last item on the list and froze.

"Organic contact radios?"

"Yeah, since the helmet radios tend to break down a lot Blue scientists tried to develop ones that would be an actual part of the human body."

"That doesn't seem physically possible."

"It wasn't. The radio was too large, and would have needed to take up

the entire inside of a human head to work properly. And since people can't work without a brain, it never really caught on."

Master Chief looked at Church in disbelief.

"You are a traitor, not only to the Blue Army, but to the every sentient being in existence."

"Why?"

"Do you know what you gave O'Malley? You gave him a way to create his own body!"

"What? No way, that technology is years off. Where's O'Malley gonna get the stuff to build it anyway?"

"Look around you. This place is one of several secret fortresses he controls across the planet. He also has hundreds of scientists at his disposal. If he's been given enough time, he probably already finished it."

The realization hit Church like a train . . . then he remembered that he didn't care.

"So what? O'Malley gets his own body. That just means he can't steal anyone else's body, right?"

"Right, except now, he can kill whoever he wants whenever he wants because he doesn't need to keep anyone alive in order to control them."

"Oh . . . yeah."

"Well then. Since this is your fault entirely, you and your friend here have one of two options. Option one: you come with us to stop O'Malley from taking over the galaxy. Option two: we leave you here, and O'Malley does what he wants with you when he finds out you escaped."

"It's not all my fault! Tucker deserves some of the blame."

"What?" Tucker sounded almost hurt. "Why do I get blamed?"

"If it wasn't for you getting sick, we would never have to have called O'Malley in the first place."

"Tucker becoming pregnant was a result of circumstances beyond his control," the Chief explained. "Therefore, he is free from any responsibility regarding this matter."

"Thank you."

"He is, however, directly associated with you, Private Church, and thusly receives the same punishment."

"Thanks a lot, asshole."

"Can it, shit-for-brains."

"Church, we aren't going to stay here forever while you two insult

each other. Now, I thought I'd let you know that he has captured Tex and is holding her against her will in a cloning and research facility."

"No, one of you assholes killed Tex. We found her at the bottom of our base with a knife in her neck."

"That was an imposter. The real Tex is being held at one of O'Malley's fortresses for reasons you wouldn't understand at this point. Now, my squad and I are leaving. Are you coming with us or are you staying here?"

Church thought about the decisions laid out before him. He could go with the Reds and help them save Tex, or he could stay here and find a way to do it himself. The first option was suicidal by his definition, and since he knew when to keep his head down, the second option presented less danger.

"I'm staying here. I'll find my own way out of this place."

The Chief nodded and turned to Tucker.

"And you?"

"Church won't last five minutes alone. I'm staying here with him."

"Then that settles it. Give my squad and me at least a minute before you exit this room."

"Why?"

"There are explosives set up along the walkways of this facility and we need to disarm them. After we're done, you're free to meander about aimlessly. There are a couple of scientists around, see if you can get them to help."

"Whatever."

"Good luck, Church, Tucker, you're gonna need it."

The Chief, Caboose and Doc exited the room. There were more footsteps, which meant that there were more soldiers with him. After the allotted minute, Tucker and Church stepped out from the room.

"Did you actually buy the 'explosives' thing?" Tucker asked.

"No, but I didn't want to be rude."

"You're scared of that guy."

"He looks like he could kill someone by staring at them."

"True. Well, let's go find those scientists."

Church and Tucker went outside of the green room and turned left onto the catwalk suspended in the air. The snow had picked up and it was hard to see the walkway. The howling winds made it difficult to hear as well. Church and Tucker didn't even notice O'Malley's transport

vessel arrive at the facility. They didn't hear the docking officer shout commands to haul the unconscious Rhinoceros into the extra large holding cell. They didn't see two patrolmen throw stun grenades down a hallway at them. The cold was so numbing that the two barely felt the explosions and the subsequent collisions with the wall. Then, they slipped into unconsciousness . . . and didn't feel anything at all.

To Be Continued

27. Colossal Problems

Chapter XXVII

Master Chief had interrogated Church and discovered part of O'Malley's evil plan: he was attempting to create a body that held an organic transmitter radio in place of a brain. Of course, the Chief had only chipped the tip of a rather large iceberg, and he would soon uncover the rest as Red Squad set out for their next destination . .

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Master Chief sat on the edge of one of the platforms inside the burned down warehouse. It was old and looked as though it would crumble away beneath him, but he didn't care. His mind was focused on the information he had received from Church's disc. O'Malley either already had or was close to having his very own body, which would mean that he would kill Sarge without a second thought. There was much to do and very little time to do it in.

The Chief looked around the warehouse. His squad was preparing for their trip to the Colossus Fortress. The Tex clone that was with them had told the Chief that the fortress hovered above hundreds of active volcanoes, feeding off of the energy to stay powered. Any breaches in the airlocks and the facility could heat up from thirty degrees to four hundred and fifty degrees in a matter of seconds. And that was in Celsius. Needless to say that such a rapid increase in temperature would be harmful to anyone inside. The original Tex was also held in this facility. Leaving the Fortress alone was not an option, however, and the Chief decided that it was too dangerous to allow it to remain intact, which was why he was bringing some BAMF explosive devices with them. He had only told Andy and Tex of this, and Tex agreed. Andy, however, was not as pleased. That is, until he was told that he wouldn't be coming back if he destroyed the facility.

Master Chief slid off of the platform and walked over to the teleporter that would take Red Squad to the cloning facility. The rest of the squad was already milling around the swirling green vortex while making final checks on all their gear. Master Chief stepped in front of the teleporter with his battle rifle in hand. He turned to make sure everyone was ready and stepped through the teleporter.

* * *

>O'Malley stepped walked down the central ramp that led to the containment cells in the basement level of the Lockout Fortress. There were now over a dozen guards protecting the area due to recent security breaches which had been immediately dealt with. O'Malley was relatively unconcerned about the escapees, however. His new body was

completed and had been moved to a secure location aboard his space station for final tests. With the meddlesome Red Squad running about O'Malley was concerned for the safety of his new body. <p>The red armored figure reached the landing and saw his newest test subject floating in a containment cell specifically built for someone of his size.<p>

"So, this is the Rhinoceros fella you've been yammerin about," Sarge said. "Impressive."

"Indeed. He shall serve our needs quite satisfactorily," O'Malley replied.

Sarge approached the containment field. Unlike the ones in the green room, this one kept the occupant fully conscious. They were also suspended in the air by a magnetic field which also encased them inside the set area.

"So, we finally meet. I have heard much about your exploits, Rhinoceros. And I'm sure you've heard plenty of mine."

"Uh, who are you?"

"What? You mean you've never heard of me? I'm-" the AI's rant was cut short by Sarge's intervention.

"Whadda ya doin? He doesn't know who we are! If we can trick 'em inta thinkin he's on our sidewe won't hafta put up with him resistin and whatnot He might even join us willingly."

"Hmm. That is a very good plan. You are much more intelligent than anyone gives you credit for, Sarge. Had you not been fooled into fighting in that ridiculous war, you would have made a superb evil villain."

"Thanks."

O'Malley turned his attention to the Rhinoceros.

"I am William DeMarco. I head all of the top secret research operations in the Red Army."

"How come I never heard of you?"

" . . . because it's top secret."

"Oh, right. How did I get here?"

"You see, you were attacked by a creature controlled by the Blue Army. You defeated it, but were attacked by Blue soldiers who wanted to brainwash you and turn you against us!"

"No! "

"Yes! They incapacitated you, but you were saved by the timely arrival of a cargo ship and its armed escorts. After they mopped up the Blue forces, they brought you here; the safest place on the whole planet."

"And where is _here_?"

"_Here_ is the Lockout Research and Containment Facility. I won't bore you with the history. You'll be safe here, but we need to run some tests on you to scan for radioactivity. Then you'll be moved to a test center where you shall begin your rehabilitation. You'll be out and about in no time."

"Ok, whatever you say, Bill."

O'Malley was about to use the Sarge's mouth to smile sinisterly, but found that the man was already displaying the expression. Sarge was turning out to be an exceptional ally.

* * *

>"I was expecting something a little bigger," Grif said. "I'm disappointed. This place is called Colossus. Shouldn't it be colossal?" <p>"Grif, we didn't name these places," the Chief stated. "Some idiotic Blue person did. Take up your complaints with him."<p>

Master Chief peeked out from their hiding spot. The teleporter had been set up underneath a platform which stuck out over a corner of the facility. It faced a large window that gave a very nice view of the smoke and flames that surrounded the facility.

As far as the Chief could tell, the place consisted of at least twenty medical staff. There were no guards in sight. Two large holding tanks sat atop the highest level, but reaching it could prove to be problematic. Security cameras were attached to almost every conceivable surface from the floors to the ceiling. The Chief, Grif and Tex had taken out some with their silenced rifles, but there were plenty more.

"Oh, I got it," Caboose said. "How about we sneak up the middle, really, _really_ quiet-like and hop on the blue circle. They'd never look for us there!"

"Caboose, we're red," Simmons said. "They wouldn't have to look for us; we'd stick out like a sore thumb."

"You have a sore thumb? I heard ice helps with that sorta thing. Too bad we left the cold places already. There was a lot of ice there!"

Lock-jaw blarged.

"That's a good idea," Andy said. "He says he should sneak around and take out the cameras one by one."

The Chief slowly turned to the alien and the bomb. "We've been sitting here for almost two hours, and _now_ you decide to tell me about your brilliant plan?"

"Hey, give him a break," Andy said. "He's like, what, two months old?"

"Fine, whatever. Lock-jaw, get on it. And while you're at it, take out those scientists as well. We can't have them running all over the place when they see us."

The alien uttered his reply and dashed out from under the platform, turning invisible in less than a second.

"Gee, I wish I could still do that," Tex said. "Too bad _somebody_broke my stealth field generator."

"I already apologized for that, Tex," the Chief said. "Maybe, instead of half-assedly trying to steal our flag data and then pulling a Benedict Arnold on O'Malley, you could've just skipped to the Benedict Arnold part and you would still be able to turn invisible."

"Excuse me? You think I did that _half-assedly_? Instead of thanking me for all the Intel I've given you, you call my work _half-assed_?"

"You didn't even attempt to subdue me!" the Chief argued. "You walked directly in front of me. If I had been carrying a weapon, we wouldn't be having this conversation. Now if that doesn't scream '_half-assed_' I don't know what does."

"So I'm not supposed to utilize the stealth field that I was given for that particular mission?"

"I saw you, Tex, which means that your stealth gear is _half-assed_, as was your attempt at stealing the data from Doc."

Grif listened to the debate for several more minutes, getting amusement from what was tossed between the two. He decided that, if they got any louder, someone would find them and they would have to escape. That meant running, and Grif would have none of that.

"Ok you two, let's stay focused. Chief, she had the gear and used it. Tex, your stealth gear sucked. If you had checked it, you would have discovered that it sucked on your own and would have tried to find another way to take the flag data. Therefore, your attempt was half-assed. While we're talking about asses, let's get everything out in the open. Me? I'm a lazy-ass. Simmons is a kiss-ass, Donut . . . well, you know. Caboose is a dumb-ass, Lopez is a wise-ass and Andy is an asshole. Doc is too scared to get up off his ass and shoot people, Lock-jaw bites people in the ass occasionally and it hurts like a bitch, Tex has a nice ass, and Chief does, indeed, kick ass."

Nobody said anything for several minutes until the Chief spoke.

"Yeah, that about sums it up. Good job, Grif."

Tex was about to scold the Chief for encouraging such language when Lock-jaw appeared.

"We did it," Andy announced proudly. "There must've been fifty cameras all over the place, but we got em. The moron scientists too. Got em all."

"Good work, you two. Let's go see what's in those tanks on the third floor."

The squad moved out in the open and walked, unopposed, towards the nearest ramp. After walking up several more ramps, the squad reached the top of the facility.

"Ok, everyone fan out. I want this place secure immediately. Tex, go see what's inside the tanks."

Tex nodded and moved towards the two large tanks in the center of the level. Inside the first one floated some horrible monster. It was nearly ten meters long, which was much too large to be held in a containment tank that was barely half its size. Spikes jutted out from its black hide which also sported a multitude of scars. Two large legs were crammed inside the enclosure and were broken in several places in order to fit inside. The arms of the creature were pressed up against the inside of the ten inch thick glass and appeared to be intact. The arms ended in clawed hands that sported three fingers on each. At the base of each hand, a part of the arm split away and formed a wing. Like the legs, the wings appeared to bend at unnatural angles; they too were broken. Finally, the head of the monster pressed against the front of the tank. It was a meter long and spikes protruded from seemingly random locations along the snout. Two larger spikes formed above the nostrils and above the eyes. The jaw and teeth of the beast were not visible; suffice to say that they were all intact. What captivated Tex were the eyes. Although dead, the eyes of the creature gave it a radiance that made it appear as though it still lived. The fiery red orbs stared off into space, focused on nothing.

Tex felt sorrow for the poor creature, but cast the feeling aside and moved on to the tank next to the beast. She knew that Tex floated inside and wasn't surprised by her horribly disfigured body or the machines that were violently shoved into her spine and brain. She was surprised by the fact that she was still alive. Had she been more focused, however, she might have paid closer attention to the beast in the adjacent tank. Even though it was dead, a finger on the great creature twitched. A nostril on its elongated snout flared. Both of the pupils contracted into tiny, almost invisible slits and took in its surroundings. Had Tex paid more attention to the tank next to that of the woman she was cloned from, she would have seen the monster as it slowly began to move inside its prison. She would have seen it before it erupted from the glass, and might have been better prepared as it opened its massive jaw and belched fire straight at her. Tex wasn't prepared, but she should have been. Dragons make easy prey of those who are unprepared.

To Be Continued

28. Dragon Slayers

Chapter XXVIII

_The Rhinoceros had successfully defeated the Lekgolo, but was captured by O'Malley shortly after and was taken to the Lockout Fortress. Meanwhile, Red Squad had infiltrated the Colossus Fortress and was in the process of securing the facility when O'Malley's guard dragon inside a holding tank sprung to life . . . _

Tex was shocked to see the black monster explode from the too-small holding cell and spit a stream of liquid fire directly at her. The

shock was momentary, however, and she rolled out of the way of the superheated flame as it struck the floor where she was standing only seconds before. The flame didn't just dissipate as a flamethrower's flame would. The liquid fire spread out on the ground like a burning puddle and slowly dissolved through the multi-layered metal plating that made up the floor as if it was made of paper. The dragon turned towards Tex and launched more of the liquid flame at her. In the process of tracking Tex, the dragon lost its balance and tumbled out of the tank. Its broken legs and wings healed themselves at an incredible rate thanks to the _O'Mallior_ in which it was held. The dragon righted itself stood at its full height, seven meters tall, and let out a roar that rattled the bones of Red Squad. The three meter long tail, which ended in a club covered in spikes, thrashed about menacingly as if daring anyone to approach it. Lock-jaw took that dare and charged at the dragon. The beast turned its head to face the attacker and roared again. Lock-jaw reciprocated by giving his own battle cry. The dragon whipped its tail towards the incoming alien, but Lock-jaw caught it just below the club. He turned on his energy sword and cut the club off of the beast. It shrieked in pain and swatted Lock-jaw away. The alien hit the floor and slid to the feet of the Master Chief and the rest of Red Squad. The Chief looked down with concern, but saw the alien make the face that could only be a smile.

"Alright everyone, let's take that son of a bitch down!"

Red Squad ran for cover, hiding behind various pieces of architecture and began to pour fire into the dragon. Each bullet only seemed to anger it more. Master Chief was thinking on his feet; something he was trained to do for most of his life. A plan came to mind, albeit a risky one, but there were no other options. The Chief turned towards Donut.

"Donut," the Chief called over the sounds of gunfire. "I need you to distract it!"

"You got it, Chief!"

Donut ran out from behind his cover, firing his SMG at the dragon. The beast turned its head to see the lone soldier charge at it. It spat fire towards the pink Private, but Donut rolled to the side just before he was hit. He primed a grenade and hurled it at the dragon's head. It bounced off the beast's forehead and exploded, sending the creature sprawling on the floor. The Chief used this opportunity to steal a cable from the destroyed holding tank. The length of the cable was longer than he was which was all he needed. As the dragon rose off of the ground, the Chief leapt at its back. He landed on the shoulders of the monster and whipped the cable around its opened mouth. He caught the other end with his free hand and held on tightly as the creature began thrashing about violently in a futile attempt to dislodge the Spartan from his back. Master Chief pulled back on the cable, causing the dragon to stumble backwards. It tripped on a ledge at the end of the platform and plummeted off the side. The rest of Red Squad quickly ran over to see if the Chief was ok. They got their answer as the dragon, proving that its wings weren't just for show, soared up in front of them and ascended up into the vast expanse of the upper facility. The Chief, still standing on the creature's shoulders, was having quite a time trying to stay on top of the beast. His task wasn't lightened by the fact that the dragon repetitively flipped and spun about in the air.

"Hey Chief," Andy said from his position locked to the Chief's waist, "this is fun and all, but I'm getting airsick. Any chance you can land this thing?"

"Not unless somebody comes up with a plan-" the Chief stopped mid-sentence and looked down at the bomb. Yet another brilliant idea sprung forth. It was a good day for the Master Chief.

The Spartan, being as careful as he could possibly be, raised his right foot up and slammed it down into the dragon's neck causing it to wail in pain. It wobbled in the air, and then plummeted down to the floor. The Chief already had his foot pressed into the soft spot on its neck. The dragon tried to snap at him, but the Chief caught its jaws before they closed and attempted to force them open. Liquid fire shot out of the beast's mouth, singing the Chief's gauntlets, but he didn't let go. The dragon grabbed the Chief around the waist with one of its clawed hands and hurled him away like a doll. The beast stood up and lunged at the soldier, only to be stopped after a few paces as something grabbed its tail. The dragon whipped its head around to see Tex holding onto the limb and pulling it back. The dragon was about to spit a stream of fire at Tex when something exploded against its skull. The monster went down, stunned from the blast. As it tried to stand, more grenades detonated against its head and torso. Then Lock-jaw, combining his blinding speed with his lethal blade, leapt at the monster and plunged the glowing sword into its eyes. The beast roared in pain and tried to swat Lock-jaw away, but found he was already gone. The dragon quickly expanded its wings and tried to fly away, but Grif wasn't about to let it get away. If it escaped, chances were that they would have to find it again, and that meant searching and possibly running. Not on Grif's watch. He brought his sniper to bear and fired two rounds, each one tore into the palms of the dragon, crippling its wings. The beast again cried out in agony and fell to the ground. Blood was pouring from its eyes. The dragon heard movement and was about to charge when the Master Chief brought his foot down on its cranium. The dragon fell to the ground and felt as its arms, legs and tail were restrained. It tossed its head in all directions, spewing fire everywhere. The fire stopped as something spherical was shoved down its throat. The dragon assumed it was the head of one of the soldiers and swallowed it. Immediately, its limbs were freed and it began spitting fire all over the facility. After several minutes, the dragon stopped. There was no movement, no noise, no guns firing, no grenades exploding, nothing. Suddenly, the spherical object inside the monster's stomach detonated, sending blood, intestines and various other body parts flying all over the facility. Red Squad cheered at the sight, but then ducked for cover as to avoid being rained on by the steaming innards.

"Nothing gets me going in the morning like a good ol' fashioned dragon slaying," the Chief said.

"I agree, sir," said Simmons. "You really beat the crap out of that thing."

"You know, I'd normally call you a kiss ass, Simmons, but I've gotta agree with you on that one."

"I'm surprised that O'Malley was able to capture it," Doc said. "They're becoming harder to find, but no less aggressive."

"I just hope that's the only one he's got," the Chief said. "I'm not sure how many of those we could take on at a time."

Lock-jaw walked up to the group holding Andy and blarged.

"You did exceptional, Lock-jaw," the Chief complimented. "You saved us no end of trouble by cutting off that club on its tail. And it didn't exactly hurt our efforts when you blinded it."

"Too bad it was trying to eat us," Donut said. He sounded disappointed. "If he was a little bit happier and maybe a nicer color, maybe we could've kept him as a pet!"

"I would have named him Hot Breath because when he breathes, everything gets really, really hot," Caboose said.

"Why would you bother keeping him as a pet," Lopez inquired in his monotonous tone. "It would be better to train him as a war beast. Then he would have found O'Malley and killed him for us."

While the soldiers were arguing about what uses the dragon would have served as a pet, the Chief saw that Tex was staring at the remaining oversized holding tank. He walked up next to her and gazed at the occupant. He had never seen anything so saddening in his life. Tex was hooked up to various machines that were apparently rammed into her spinal column in a violent way. The skin on her back was torn up by the machines' intrusion. Her hair, or what was left of it, floated about in the green fluid. The back of her skull was torn off and several wires were jammed into the brain cavity. Half of Tex's nose was missing since a large cable, too big to fit in her nostril, was jammed up into her head. Her mouth hung open since there were nearly two dozen wires and cables that were forced down her throat which pumped oxygen to her lungs and some nutritional substance into her stomach. Hundreds of scars ranging from half an inch to two feet long covered her exposed body. Her life, her freedom and her dignity had been stripped away from her. She was barely a shadow of her former self. Tex's clone and the Chief looked into her eyes. Normally, they would have been sky blue. Now they were almost entirely grey. The life had almost been completely drained from her. Tex's clone felt a tear roll down her face. More followed as the original directed her eyes at a panel that sat on a pedestal in front of the tank. There was one button on it. It was labeled 'ABORT'.

The Chief saw what Tex and her clone were looking at and understood immediately. He turned to face his companion.

"If you want me to, I will," he said softly.

"No," Tex said. "I'll do it. I wouldn't have it any other way."

The Chief caught one last glimpse at the woman floating in the tank and could have sworn that he saw the corners of her mouth curve up into a barely visible smile. He ran up to the rest of the squad.

"People, listen up. Get down to the teleporter. We're blowing this place to smithereens."

"What about the BAMFS?" Andy asked.

"We found a self destruct button, so we don't need to use them. At least not now."

Without another word, the squad complied and ran down to secure the teleporter. The Chief turned to Tex, whose hand was hovering over the button. She took one last look at the one who was responsible for her being and pushed the button. Alarms blared throughout the facility and a countdown timer appeared on the Chief's HUD; 00:20. Twenty seconds to escape before the facility was destroyed. The Chief turned to run, but saw Tex, frozen to the floor in front of her original copy. The Chief ran up to her and placed a hand on her shoulder. Tex began sobbing at the touch and fell into the Chief. Although Tex needed support, he wouldn't be able to give any if they were all dead. He picked her up and carried her to the teleporter, bridal style. Lopez was still waiting for them, and allowed for the two to step through the teleporter before entering it himself. The second he did, the facility's seals on the fuel tanks released, sending them plummeting into the active volcanoes below. It detonated, taking the whole facility with it along with a large number of volcanoes. After the dust settled, only a crater would remain.

Master Chief stepped out of the teleporter and into the familiar warehouse. Tex was still sobbing in his arms and he carried her off, away from prying eyes. There was still one more fortress left, but the stability of the squad came first. Soon, Red Squad would arrive at Relic. And their lives would be changed forever.

To Be Continued

29. Almost Ready

Chapter XXIX

_O'Malley's dragon had been slain by Red Squad after their arrival at the Colossus Fortress. The facility was destroyed in a massive explosion taking the original Tex with it. Several days had passed and Red Squad was ready to depart to the final fortress O'Malley had on the planet . . . _

"Ok, everyone, let's move out," Master Chief said.

The squad stood behind the Chief and watched as he walked into the teleporter . . . and into the wall behind it.

"Ow! What the hell?" the Chief rubbed the front of his helmet where he had hit the wall. "What's going on?"

"O'Malley probably figured out that we hit his other fortresses and blocked off the teleporter at Relic," Tex explained. "Looks like we're walking."

"To an island?" Grif said. "Have fun, kiddos."

"Nobody's walking to the island," the Chief said. "Nobody can walk to the island, because it is an island."

"Wow, thank God you're here, Chief," Grif said sarcastically. "Nobody would have ever thought of that."

"Shut up, Grif," Simmons said. "I, for one, am glad that he pointed that out. Otherwise, you would have tried to walk to it."

"You know what, Simmons, you're right. I would've. And I would've made it too. Everyone knows how divine I am."

"Not funny, Grif," the Chief interrupted. He wasn't a religious man, but mocking any sort of deity went against his policies. You never know when they might pop out of nowhere and smite you.

He looked into the swirling vortex and sighed. There were only two ways to get to the island now that the teleporter option was gone. They could go by sea or by air. A boat would take too long, but air travel would get them shot down. If the aircraft was well-enough armored, however . . .

"Ok, here's the plan; Simmons, get on the horn to command. Tell them we need one of those Albatross-Class transports. See if they can send us any weapons and ammunition too. We're gonna fly to the island, super accurate AD turrets or not. We need to get there as quickly as possible, and a boat would take too long. Get your gear ready, everyone, we're moving out."

* * *

>O'Malley wasn't in a particularly good mood. He had just received word that his Colossus Fortress had been utterly destroyed. That meant that Tex was killed and his dragon guardian was dead. The beast had been hard to locate and even harder to capture, as it had killed half of the soldiers who attempted to subdue it. The dragon was exclusive to the volcanic regions on the planet and ever since the war reached there, their numbers had decreased. O'Malley was lucky to have caught that one, but he feared he would never get that lucky again. The evil AI looked around through Sarge's eyes as scientists scrambled about moving as quickly as possible in order to finish the room they were in. <p>"I thought that Burdick fella said the weapon wouldn't be ready for another month," Sarge said. "How are we already at the Control Room phase?"<p>

"We need this facility to be operational, you fool," O'Malley explained. "Once the control room is completed, the super weapon will be much easier to interface. The weapon will be ready to fire as soon as it is added." O'Malley chuckled at the thought of the weapon's activation.

"Ah, I see. That's a very good plan ya got goin there, O'Malley, but what about that other weapon yer thinking about settin loose?"

"I cannot release them until this weapon is ready. According to tests, their intelligence expands at incredible rates. Having them running amok would jeopardize the plan, as they could possibly disable the super weapon . . ."

O'Malley stopped talking as one of the engineers who was working on a display interface cheered. The lights in the room dimmed for several seconds, and then returned to normal. When they came back on, however, so did a massive holographic display of the entire installation. It rotated slowly as if in orbit. The facilities that had been built all along the surface were pointed out by small

holographic tabs. Even the groups of personnel were indicated. It worked perfectly.

"Excellent work, my henchmen," O'Malley began. One of the female workers cleared her throat loudly. O'Malley sighed. "And hench_women_. You have been successful, now, teleport yourselves to the Override Key Room and finish with the security devices. We are almost finished."

The personnel in the room activated their portable teleportation generators and were engulfed in rings of golden light. Their bodies were transported instantly through time and space to the room where they began working immediately.

O'Malley took one last look at the holographic display and turned to leave. He reached into a pouch on Sarge's belt and withdrew a small fragment of a crystal. It was glowing red either from the evil O'Malley gave off, Sarge's prior affiliation and current armor color or other causes. The radiation it gave off served several purposes. The most convenient was the fact that it made light speed travel even faster, if that was possible. Where a normal ship would take a week to travel from one side of the galaxy to the other, the crystal allowed the same ship to make the voyage in three and a half days. It was a most useful item. Several more like it had been found and each one was in O'Malley's possession. The crystals served other purposes such as healing wounds, numbing pain, allowing for individual levitation and flight and even natural teleportation. More functions were being discovered on almost a weekly basis, but the research had been stopped when O'Malley discovered what he truly needed from the object; its supernatural powers of amplification. One crystal was divided into eight pieces and a segment was placed into one of the seven installations in order to magnify the power of the super weapon when it fired. Since the crystal fragments were part of a whole, they linked the installations together, which meant that whoever carried the eighth segment could instantly transport themselves to any one of the seven installations. O'Malley held the eighth segment in his hand. While he could transport himself to where he needed to be, he had yet to figure out how to transport other people or objects with him, which meant that he still needed to use ships to carry supplies to his next destination. He activated Sarge's radio and contacted his personal super-carrier/warship.

"Commander Maxis, this is O'Malley. I am coming aboard your vessel. I trust everything is ready?"

"Yes, O'Malley. We have the Rhinoceros aboard as well as the two Blue soldiers you recaptured and all are in Cryogenic Freeze. Wyoming is here also, as you commanded. We are ready to go, sir."

"Excellent, I will be aboard momentarily."

O'Malley cut the signal before the Commander could respond. Sarge held the crystal in his fist and concentrated on the command bridge of the vessel, _O'Malley I_. A red light engulfed the ex-sergeant and his AI parasite and transported them to the ship.

* * *

>It had only taken several hours for Red Command to send Red Squad their Albatross-Class transport. It came with a brand new warthog and

a fresh supply of weapons and ammo. After everyone took their weapons of choice, the squad boarded the craft and took off towards the island fortress.<p><p>

To Be Continued

30. Lies and Saviors

Chapter XXX

(bow-chic-a-bow-wow)

(just kidding)

(. . . perverts)

_Red Squad was unable to reach the Relic Fortress via teleportation so they settled for the next fastest way; air travel. The Albatross-Class transport that was sent by Red Command had been airborne for barely an hour when the island came into view . .

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"Private Donut, what is our bearing?" the Chief asked.

"What? Chief, I can fly this thing, but I have no idea what the little knobs and dials say. All I know is that if I pull up on the handle bars, the ship goes up and that if I push it down, the ship goes down. The red buttons shoot stuff and the green button activates the on-flight movie. Other than that, I'm lost. I'm not even fully certified to fly this thing."

"Let's just keep that out little secret, _pilot_."

"Whatever you say, Chief."

Master Chief stood in between the pilot and copilot seats where Donut and Tex sat respectively. He had been standing there for most of the trip since there weren't enough seats for everyone. Six could sit in the passenger area, which meant that Andy was being held by Lock-jaw. Tex and Donut had volunteered to fly the ship and the Chief decided to stand.

"We're coming up on the island now, Chief," Tex said. "We're being tracked by the AD turrets. We'll be in their range in four seconds."

The Chief turned to the passenger section. "Buckle up back there, things are about to get bumpy."

No sooner had the words left his mouth, the turrets opened fire. Hyper-accelerated rounds fired from the magnetic accelerator cannons and either flew past the transport or scored hits along the armor. The Albatross slowly began to descend while trying to avoid the heavy fire, but to no avail. One of the rounds scored a hit on one of the wing bases. It shuddered from the speed which the rest of the ship was going and broke off from the rest of the craft, spiraling down into the sea. The turrets registered the hit as fatal and stopped firing. The Albatross crashed into the ground nose first and skidded along the sand. The reverse thrusters were opened and the ship slowed

to a stop just before crashing into a large hill. The Chief made sure Donut and Tex were ok before checking on the rest of the squad, who were also unharmed. The Chief kicked down the door that led to the vehicle cargo area and found that the three sides had fallen off and the warthog had slid down the ramp behind it and had rolled to a stop in the sand. It was only slightly damaged.

"Alright Red Squad, we're making camp here. Grif, I need info on the fortress' defenses and I need it three minutes ago," the Chief ordered.

"Great Scott, I left my DeLorean back at the warehouse! Man, this is heavy," Grif said while leaving to get into position.

"Simmons, take tabs on the gear. I want to know what's serviceable and what's not," the Chief continued, ignoring Grif's remark. "Donut, Lopez, check and make sure the hog's ok. We'll need it. Everyone else, we're setting up camp here. Tex, Lock-jaw, come with me."

The soldiers and the alien walked into the destroyed Albatross and, after several minutes of otherwise fruitless searching, found several bullet-proof titanium shields stowed away in a compartment. Lock-jaw took them and set them up near an opening behind the downed transport. While the alien was busy, Tex saw several stationary turrets. She and the Chief both took one and walked out of the ship. The Chief set his up near the shields that Lock-jaw had set up and Tex set hers up on top of the downed transport. After the defenses were established, Lock-jaw went to set up his tent within the semicircle surrounding the area where a fire would be made. Grif came down from his scouting position.

"They've got at least fifty guards all over the place. Some of them are loading ammo into a tank and a few more are getting a warthog ready. Chances are that they're coming over here to make sure there weren't any survivors."

Simmons walked up to them while Grif was reporting.

"Sir, all of the weapons and ammo are intact and accounted for. There were also a few more rocket launchers than initially thought. There's ammo for all of them as well."

The Chief knew that if they engaged the enemy, they would attract the attention of the rest of the guards. Still, there seemed to be no other choice.

"Grif, prep the squad. We're taking as many of them down as we can. Simmons, contact command and see if they can send us any reinforcements. We're not going down without a fight."

* * *

>O'Malley stood before the two Blue soldiers in the brig. Their wrists were bound together by energy binders and their feet were magnetically sealed to the floor. O'Malley looked directly at their faces. Or rather, he looked at Private Tucker's face. Church, being a lost soul inside a robotic body had no head beneath the helmet. Tucker looked uneasy. Of course, anyone would be uneasy if their mortal enemy was standing barely a foot away from them holding a fully loaded shotgun. <p>"So, you fools tried to escape my fortress?"

O'Malley asked. "A futile gesture, no doubt."<p>

"We didn't try to escape, those Reds let us out!" Tucker cried.

"The Reds let ya out?" Sarge said. "Now why would they do that? I mean, they're Reds, after all. If it was me, I'dda just shot ya right through the glass. Problem solved!"

"Yes, and thank God it wasn't you," Church said. Church was abnormally calm, but since he was a ghost, O'Malley had no power over him. At least, he didn't think he did. And, if worse came to worst and O'Malley decided to kill them, Church could just get up and leave.

"Apparently our cobalt friend is overconfident, Sarge. He believes he is perfectly safe. Is this true?" O'Malley's voice was laced with anticipation. He had something up his host body's gauntlet.

"Well, I'm a ghost. Ghosts are already dead, and I don't think they can die twice. Unless that's what you're all excited about and you found a way to kill ghosts."

O'Malley snickered sinisterly. "You are correct; there is no known way to kill ghosts. I've done something better!"

Sarge walked over to a lab table where a white cloth was draped over something. The red armored hand grabbed the sheet and yanked it off the table, exposing a body lying in a comatose state. Church instantly recognized the face.

"What the . . . ok O'Malley, how the fuck did you get that?"

"What, this old thing? I have Doc to thank for that. Long story short, a sample of your blood allowed me to clone you a brand new body! Isn't that just _magnificent_?"

Church was shocked. O'Malley had gone through the trouble of recreating his old body from a blood sample? That process would have taken at least a month of direct observation and upkeep.

"What's the catch?" Church was still unable to think that O'Malley would do this out of the kindness of his heart.

"Catch? There's no catch, my friend . . . because _you_ don't have a _choice_!"

O'Malley began to cackle in his familiar evil voice while Sarge picked up a device lying next to the body.

"We specifically designed this to be excruciatingly painful, ya dirty Blue," Sarge said.

"Designed what? What the fuck are you talking about?" Church was now concerned. They had made something that could hurt him, and that wasn't any good at all.

"You see, there is a device implanted inside the head of this body. It emits a very powerful beam that picks up all electromagnetic fields. Since ghosts are mostly energy, and thusly are partially composed of electromagnetic waves, you will be forcefully removed

from your robotic body and placed inside of this organic one. Attempting to leave the new body will kill you, permanently, and attempting to remove the device will kill you, permanently. Any questions? No? Good. Begin the procedure!"

O'Malley resumed laughing evilly as Sarge pressed the button on the remote. Church suddenly felt his ghostly form moving out of his robot shell. At first, it felt like he was leaving his body like he would normally do, but he wasn't in control of his body. After he was outside of the shell, however, his ghostly form began to demolecularize and was sucked into the new body.

"Wait! NO! I have questions! **I HAVE QUESTIONS**!" Church bellowed.

Every second of the process was extremely painful, and it only got worse as his body was sucked into the receiver. He tried to scream, but that only made the unimaginable pain worse. It throbbed throughout his entire body until he could take no more. Church blacked out. Tucker watched the whole thing and was now extremely scared.

"You're not gonna pull that shit on me, are you?" he asked.

"No, why would we waste our precious mechanical resources on you? Church was the one that required an organic body, and you already possess one. It is very disgusting, unkempt and ugly, but it is present."

"Hey!"

"Can it, ya damn Blue. He's right; yer as ugly as sin! Maybe even as ugly as Grif!"

"Now that's just plain rude."

"Quiet you fools, he's waking up."

Church groaned and slowly opened his eyes. After several moments, they focused on the red helmet hovering over him.

"I swear, once I get my armor and a really big gun . . ."

"Silence! There is a reason I have brought you here and have done these painful things to you."

"What would that be? So you can laugh and tell your poker buddies about it later?"

"No! Well, sorta. Not entirely. Maybe just a little-"

"Shut up!" O'Malley exclaimed. Sarge had come close to exposing them. "Church, there is something you must know about your precious friend Tex."

"I heard you had her. So what happened?"

"That is untrue. She was under my care until that dreadful Red Squad showed up. I don't know how to say this in a way that is unoffensive, so I'm just going to say it blatantly and in a way that will probably

cause you emotional pain. They killed her, Church. They killed Tex."

* * *

>"Caboose!" shouted the Master Chief, "get down!" <p>Caboose, who had become much better at taking orders dropped to the ground as a tank shell roared just over his head and exploded into the hill behind him showering Red Squad in sand and rock. The battle had been getting progressively worse for Red Squad over the course of the last few hours. The numbers of the guards was almost the same as the number of Blues at Terminal, and the squad had managed to reduce the numbers to thirty before the initial attack began. Unlike the Blues at Terminal, however, these guards were highly trained. After losing almost half of their numbers in a blind rush, they had regrouped and were using the strategic advantages the Fortress and its immediate surroundings provided. The guards had been slowly advancing and were forcing the squad into tighter and tighter quarters as the battle wore on. The current situation also reflected the battle at Terminal. However, at the end of that battle the Rhinoceros had come to the rescue. The Chief realized that they wouldn't be so lucky. And that's when he and Red Squad heard three words that might as well have been spoken from the mouth of God himself.<p>

"_Firing Main Cannons!_"

To Be Continued

31. Alliance

Chapter XXXI

_O'Malley had secured Church and Tucker aboard his space vessel and was slowly bending them to his will. Meanwhile, Red Squad was nearly defeated on O'Malley's island base when a familiar and welcome voice greeted their ears . . . _

BA_DOOM

That was the sound that echoed across the island and carried out over the sea. To some, it was the sound of death bearing down on its victims. It was a sound to be feared because when there was one, there were bound to be plenty more. The sound indicated that in seconds, friends and fellow soldiers would die. In seconds, expensive equipment would be demolished. In seconds, the tide of the battle would be turned.

To others, it was a glorious sound almost like that of pleasant music. It signaled salvation and emancipation. It was a sound to enjoy because when there was one, there were bound to be plenty more. The sound indicated that in seconds, dangerous hostiles would be reduced to a red smear and a lifeless corpse. In seconds, the enemy vehicles would turn to smoldering wreckage. In seconds, the tide of the battle would be turned.

The fine soldiers of Red Squad were those who enjoyed the sound and embraced it. The Fortress Guards were those who cowered in fear, looking for a possible escape.

"Firing Main Cannons!" the mechanical voice said again.

****BA_DOOM_****

Sand, rocks and dirt were blown in all directions, accompanied by several guards. The Reds couldn't see their savior from behind their hill, but they didn't have to see what was out there. They all knew the voice. They all knew the usual declaration of immanent attack. They all recognized the dual explosions followed by rocket impacts, plasma lances and cannon fire. Shawn, the M808C Main Assault Tank had come to the rescue. The Chief looked up into the sky and considered about rethinking his religious status.

"Chief, they're all scattered!" Tex shouted. "Now's our chance!"

Rather than reply, the Chief slung his battle rifle and pulled up his SMGs. He charged out from behind the hill, followed by the rest of Red Squad. They took up positions and fired at the disorganized guards. Shawn fired plasma lances that burned holes right through the chests of the guards. Rockets exploded and tore hostiles limb from limb. His MAC gun obliterated fortified positions and smothered enemies into the ground. The Fortress Guards never stood a chance.

The Chief, after making sure all of the dead guards were truly dead, walked over to Shawn.

"I told you I'd end up bailing you out of trouble sooner or later," the tank said.

"I'm glad you did. We probably wouldn't have made it."

"Well you did, and that's what matters."

"Indeed it is, Shawn. So tell me, why did you decide to come help us? Is everything ok back at Blood Gulch?"

"Better than ok, Chief. Command came in only a few days after you guys left and secured the whole canyon. I helped move stuff for a while, but they didn't have much use for me when all the scientific gear was moved in. So I just talked to the scientists and stuff like that for a while. Then Command tells me that your ship got shot down and decided to send me here. Someone on the inside got the word out that this place was heavily guarded."

"Red Command has a spy within O'Malley's ranks?"

"Hmph, not anymore. Apparently rumors started spreading around O'Malley's ranks about a spy, so he rounded up all the possible suspects and killed them. Our mole was one of em."

"O'Malley isn't fooling around."

"Guess not."

"Well, I would love nothing more than a mobile death machine to accompany us on our voyages, but I'm not sure if you'd fit through the teleporters."

"That's ok Chief. I wasn't really sent here to follow you around. I was sent here to help you take out the guards and," Shawn pointed his cannons up at the AD turrets and blasted them to pieces, "do that to secure the place for Command's research crew."

"I see. So, you're on guard duty now, huh?"

"Yup."

"Well, congratulations."

"Thanks Chief. I appreciate it."

Master Chief nodded and turned to assess the rest of his squad. Lock-jaw was out searching for any possible surviving guards while the rest of the squad policed ammo from the felled soldiers.

"Everyone, listen up," the Chief said, projecting his voice so they could all hear. "We're moving our camp site to this location. Lucky for us, those guards didn't frag our gear. Everything is intact and won't take long to move."

"Aw, but I wanted to stay on the beach!" Caboose whined.

"I don't think anyone wants to get swept out to sea during the tide, Caboose."

"Oh, that's ok. The whales are my friends. They would save you if you were drowning."

"Like I was saying," the Chief continued after a short pause, "get your tents and the rest of your gear and set it up in this area."

Red Squad began to move out, but the Chief waved Grif over.

"Grif, you see the tippy top of the tower there," the Chief said motioning to the highest point of the structure that was built into the island. "I think that would be an excellent spot for some scouting."

"You've got to be kidding," Grif said. "You're kidding, right? There's no way I'm going up there."

"I never said you were. I was just commenting on its possible usefulness. If someone managed to get up there, we'd never get caught off guard!"

"Wait, you don't want me to go up there?"

"Why would I subject one of my own men, especially my best sniper, to such torture? I was just saying that it would be a good vantage point for a sniper."

Grif shook his head.

"Sometimes I don't understand you, sir."

With that, Grif left to go move his supplies from the beachfront to the spot the Chief had designated. The Master Chief smiled behind his visor and, after a quick patrol with Lock-jaw to absolutely make sure that there were no possible assassins or saboteurs, he returned to the new campsite to find everything was set up. Shawn was busy shoving the downed Albatross into the ocean and Lopez was making inspections on the warthog. Dusk had come, and the sun setting on the horizon cast shadows that nearly blanketed the entire island in darkness.

A fire started by Lopez was roaring as it burned through drift wood and a Red Army fuel source called wine, which was able to burn continuously for hours. It was good for fires, but not good for fueling vehicles as it was extremely flammable. Since its explosive properties were discovered, the Red Army had moved on to more efficient fuel sources, but they still supplied wine to soldiers in order to sustain fires where other fuel sources were scarce. As usual, everyone was roasting an assortment of foods over the open flame while sharing stories while Tex and the Master Chief sat in their tent. The Chief was looking at the casualty figures of the Bombardment of Foundation; a robotic testing facility. The Red forces had been pinned down, but were saved by the timely arrival of Commander Schreiber and his team. The news of the Red victory brought a grin to the Chief's face. After getting the good news he had wanted to hear he glanced over at Tex who was, once again, polishing her battle rifle intensely. The barrel of the gun had been shoved into the mouth of a guard during the scuffle earlier in the day and was fired. The result sent the man's brains flying out the back of his head, but the kill came with a price. Blood had stained the barrel, and that wouldn't be tolerated. The Chief grinned for the second time that evening. He set down the data pad and slid under his blanket, resting his head on his pillow. He had almost drifted off when he felt Tex snuggle up against his muscular frame. He wrapped his arm around her and pulled her closer. The Chief grinned for the third and final time that night. Being happy enough to grin three times in a night, let alone a day, was unheard of for the Master Chief. Of course, sleeping with an identical genetic clone of a freelancer was unheard of as well. The Chief decided to list off all of the things he experienced that were 'unheard of' so he could fall asleep faster. Despite the unbelievably long list, the man was asleep within minutes.

* * *

>Church was shocked. O'Malley had spent the last several hours explaining to him how the Reds had killed Tex. He was skeptical at first, but after he saw the recording from a hidden camera his thoughts were in disarray. <p>"Ok, so the Reds went to your facility looking for Tex. They got there, killed all of the scientists looking after her and destroyed all the cameras. Then they almost killed Tex, but your dragon thing tried to stop them. They killed the dragon and used some robot to activate the self destruct sequence which killed Tex and a bunch of innocent scientists who were in other parts of the structure. Is that right?"<p>

"Yes," O'Malley said.

"Then answer me this one question, O'Malley. Who the fuck was killed back at our base? We got word from Blue Command that the Master Chief guy broke in, kidnapped Caboose, killed Tex and left. I saw Tex the

next morning and she looked pretty dead to me. There was even a knife sticking out of the back of her neck. The Master Chief guy said it was an imposter."

O'Malley took a deep breath through Sarge's lungs. He didn't need to breathe, but it added dramatic tension.

"I have reason to believe that the Red Army Research Department paid the organization that Tex had belonged to before she became a freelancer. It was the same organization that created me and placed me inside her armor. The payment was for a sample of Tex's blood. The Red Army has hidden technological advancements before. Hiding the progress they've made on cloning would be no different."

"Wait, you think she was cloned? You think that the Tex who attacked our base was a clone?"

"I had the original Tex in my care, so that is the only logical explanation I can give."

Church turned the thoughts over in his mind. A Tex clone? It made some sense.

"Alright, so, you were caring for Tex. The Red Army cloned her and sent the clone to our base to do something, but it was killed by the Master Chief guy . . . wait, why would the Reds kill one of their own?"

"Perhaps the clone was trying to join your team, but was killed by the Master Chief before she was able to."

"Ok, so he killed the clone, and then he went off to kill the original. Why?"

"Perhaps he saw Tex as a valuable asset to your team. With her out of the way, he would have had no trouble getting to and eliminating you."

"Ok, but who was that person in the black armor that activated the self-destruct sequence?"

"A robot. The button was there so I could destroy the facility when I was finished with it, but I couldn't have anyone try to sabotage my plans, so I had the button set to send out powerful blasts of electricity. A living person would die from such an exposure before they could even put pressure on the device, but a robot would merely short circuit, as you see here," O'Malley replayed the recording right before the feed was cut. The figure in the black armor pressed the button and fell against the Chief shortly after.

"Clearly the robot is unable to function," he explained. The Chief then picked up the robot and carried it out of the camera's view.

"Ok, so all of that really did happen. But why did you have to capture us and painfully put me in this new body?"

"Well, you know how the saying goes. _All work and no play makes O'Malley a dull AI_."

"I don't think that's what it was originally."

"Quiet you fool."

"So, you want us to join you?"

"Yes, yes I do. Together, we can defeat the Reds and the Blues, ending this petty squabble once and for all! You can avenge Tex's death! Tucker, you can get your baby back!"

"Ribs?" Tucker asked hopefully.

"No, I mean your baby alien."

"Oh," Tucker dropped his head, his voice sounded crestfallen.

"So Church, what do you say?"

Church thought very hard. O'Malley, who he had thought was evil, had actually been looking out for Tex the whole time she was gone. Now that she was dead, O'Malley was offering him a chance to avenge her death. Church had still loved her, but was unwilling to tell her that. Now she was dead and he would never get that chance. O'Malley was offering him an opportunity to make up for it. His gaze met Sarge's visor. O'Malley was looking at the man through the sergeant's eyes and was hoping his well-fabricated lie had worked. Church outstretched his hand.

"O'Malley, you've got yourself a deal."

To Be Continued

32. Priorities

Chapter XXXII

_Thanks to the timely arrival of Shawn, Red Squad was able to defeat O'Malley's guards at the Relic Fortress while the evil AI convinced Church and Tucker to join him. The next day, the squad prepared to move out . . . _

It had been a very eventful morning. The Master Chief awoke to sounds of machinery moving about around the fortress. He exited his tent after putting his armor on and saw that the Red Army had wasted no time in securing the area. There were new AD turrets being placed around the island along with a plethora of other equipment. O'Malley's stash of doomsday weapons had been found and scientists from all fields were busy examining them. There were also over fifty guards stationed across the island. The Chief saw that his squad was already awake, but they seemed to have no idea what was going on. The Chief noticed that Lock-jaw was missing, as was Andy.

He was about to ask where they had gone to when he saw a Pelican-Class transport touch down on an open section of the beach. A woman stepped out of the ship, spotted the Chief and began walking over to him accompanied by half a dozen personal guards. She was wearing a heavy black trench coat, which seemed unusual considering their current location and the temperature. She was carrying a briefcase in one hand while her other hand was waving off soldiers

and informants. He long silver hair was occasionally blown about in the ocean breeze, but it did nothing to subtract from her serious demeanor.

"Master Chief Petty Officer, Spartan One Seventeen?" he voice was stern and authoritative.

"Yes?"

"I'm, Amanda Niatrecsa, head of the O'Malley Search and Destroy Unit."

"The what? O'Malley has his own SAD unit? I thought those were reserved for psychopathic serial killers, terrorists and evil madmen."

"O'Malley fits all of those descriptions," the woman said. "This is the first time the Red Army has needed to organize one for a rampant AI. I head the unit because of my experience in these matters."

"So let me guess, you're here to tell my squad to go back to Blood Gulch and your people will take it from here?"

"Although that's what some of the RA brass wanted to do, the majority voted on keeping you in the action, including myself. Your squad has had plenty of past encounters with this O'Malley character and your records indicate that you are an impeccable leader."

"I appreciate it. So, you have a plan?"

"We're working on one. Intel speculated that you would already have a plan in action. Were they right?"

"Yes. I have formulated a plan; 'Operation: Red Rage'. The operation is carried out in phases that are planned out as the operation progresses allowing for new information to be incorporated into it and making it adaptable."

"Impressive," Amanda said. She pulled out a file from her briefcase that was marked '117' on the front in large red type. She opened it, revealing several pages of information on the Chief including several photos. "Not only are you smart and dangerous, but you're not bad looking either," she said while looking at the photos.

Anyone else would have blushed, but the Chief had long ago perfected the art of ignoring and disregarding flattery. It got nobody anywhere.

"Thank you. Its about time someone noticed that I'm more than just an incredible person. A pretty face can get you places, or so I hear."

Amanda smiled. "A sense of humor? Oh my, I think I've hit the jackpot."

Her smile faded and, after skimming through several more pages, she placed the folder back inside the briefcase.

"We have reason to believe that O'Malley has seven space stations scattered across the galaxy. Each one has a super weapon inside of

it. We're unsure of its destructive capabilities, but with all of the research we gathered, it can't be good. We found a pattern in how the installations were distributed."

From a deep pocket inside the trench coat, she withdrew a small circular device no larger than an apple. She set it on the table and pressed a button on the side. A miniaturized view of the galaxy appeared inside of a sphere. From top to bottom, it was one and a half meters tall. Seven red dots indicated each installation.

"Each installation is a different size. The smallest is roughly the size of Earth while the largest is as large as Earth's sun. The other five are somewhere in between. The larger ones are spaced out farther apart than other ones while the smaller ones are closer together. The OSADU theorized several ways the super weapon would be fired. We settled with this one."

She pressed another button and a small sphere began to form around the red dots. They expanded quickly at first, but as the spheres got bigger they grew at a slower rate. Finally, they stopped and froze. The spheres that emanated from the super weapons had engulfed the entire galaxy.

"You think he has this kind of power?" the Chief asked.

"Several Red outposts were destroyed not too long ago. Survivors from the attacks all reported the same thing: a man in red armor, a man in white armor and a woman in black armor. They attacked the bases, killed anyone who interfered, stole the flag and left. Intercepted Blue transmissions indicate the same thing happened to those bases as well. We calculated that O'Malley has a total of six pairs of flags, which means that he has six functional super lasers. We believe he is using those lasers as the primary weapon for his installations."

"The laser is a beam laser, though," the Chief said. "The example you showed me indicated that the super weapons engulfed the galaxy with spheres."

"We're not sure how he's going to manage to use the lasers to fire into space. We're not even sure if the death spheres are going to be in play. We do know that he needs them, and we can't let him get the two that you have."

The Chief looked down at his belt. The two flagpoles were attached to clamps on his left and right hip to keep them separated. Thankfully, the flagpoles were retractable and could store the actual flag inside. When retracted, the poles were only six inches long and could be easily carried around.

"Do you need to take them?"

Amanda brought her hand to her chin, deciding on whether or not to secure them.

"No," she decided, "I think I can leave them in your care. O'Malley will have a tough time getting them off of you."

"We can only hope," the Chief said. "Oh, where's Lock-jaw and Andy?"

Amanda looked at the Chief and raised an eyebrow. He couldn't see her eyes behind her sunglasses, but the eyebrows told enough.

"You mean the alien and the talking bomb? They're showing General Radeon around the fortress. They were already awake when the first troops arrived to secure the area and decided to give a tour."

The Chief nodded, relieved that they hadn't been taken away for scientific studies and the like.

"Alright. Now, I assume you received the information about our discoveries regarding the other three fortresses?"

"Yes," Amanda replied. "The Containment Fortress has been secured and the sentinel robots there have been destroyed. The Lockout Fortress was invaded, but everything had been cleared out. They must've left in a hurry because the whole place was a mess. After securing that one, our special forces went to the site of the Colossus Fortress' wreckage and confirmed the kill. Now we've secured this island, so that takes care of the planetary Fortresses."

"Where do we go from here?"

"A ship is prepared to take you to the nearest installation. Its in orbit awaiting your arrival."

"Excellent. I'll assemble the squad. We should be ready to go in five minutes."

"You aren't going there yet," Amanda said. "There's something you need to pick up at the Foundation Robotic Testing Facility first."

"What is it?"

The woman grinned. "Something to help you finish this fight."

* * *

>"Ryan, can you hear me?" O'Malley was concerned for his test subject. A man of his size would be very hard to come by if this one died. <p>"Whoa, Bill? Is that you?" Ryan was woozy from the recent test.<p>

Supposedly, the tests that were conducted on him were to test for traces of radiation in his genetic makeup from when the Lekgolo hit him in the chest with his plasma cannon. William had told him that any radiation could damage his rehabilitation progress. Finding and eliminating the radiation was William DeMarco's top priority. What Ryan didn't know was that William DeMarco was actually O'Malley. Ryan also didn't know the real reasons why he was being scanned on multiple levels for radiation.

During the studies conducted at the Containment Fortress, a possible safeguard against infection from the parasite was found in radiation. Even minimal amounts made it impossible for an infection form to take over the neural systems. All of O'Malley's scientists had been exposed to some sort of radiation and most of his soldiers had as well. If Ryan had been exposed to any, it would take a very long time

to filter it out of his system, thus prolonging the . . .
procedure.

"Yes, it is I, William. You are ok."

O'Malley looked at a computer next to the Rhinoceros which, after taking the DNA sample, would display the amount of radiation inside his body. The AI was taken aback when the readings showed no traces of any sort of radioactivity.

"It appears as though you are free from any radioactive contamination, Ryan, congratulations."

"Good," Ryan said. The effects from the testing were wearing off, but the man still felt weak.

"Yes, very good indeed," O'Malley began to chuckle. Although he was getting better at containing his maniacal laughter, sometimes it just slipped out. Before he knew it, O'Malley was laughing his most evil laugh as loud as possible. Ryan, thinking it was happy laughing, joined in. The two laughed for nearly two minutes before O'Malley realized that he was doing it again and ceased immediately. Ryan, after realizing he was the only one laughing, also abruptly stopped. Awkward silence hung in the air.

"So, now that you are officially free from radiation, you must report to your chambers for rest. The testing has taken a lot of strength from you whether you know it or not and you need sleep."

Ryan nodded and made his way back to his room aboard the super-carrier/war ship. When he entered the room, O'Malley sealed the doors and vented knock-out gas into the enclosure. Ryan didn't even see the black smoke fill the room and thought he was falling asleep faster due to the testing. After he was successfully incapacitated, O'Malley made for the bridge. There was a special guest waiting for him at Installation V; one whose brain would be cloned six times. The cloned brains would then be implanted into specially designed, self repairing Monitor constructs. His willing donor, whose original brain would be used for the procedure, was a spy for O'Malley. Sarge smiled as O'Malley's thoughts filled his head and made his way to the command deck. The spy O'Malley had sent to the Red Temple at Battle Creek was waiting for them.

To Be Continued

33. Foundations

Chapter XXXIII

_Following the battle at the Relic Fortress, the Master Chief met up with Amanda Niatreca, head of the O'Malley Search and Destroy Unit. They had discussed ideas regarding O'Malley's evil plan to destroy all life in the galaxy and not long after, the Chief was on his way to the Foundation Robotic Testing Facility . . . _

The Pelican-Class transport soared over a barren desert like it had been for hours. There wasn't too much to see, unless someone was excited about endless stretches of sand and the occasional boulder or cactus. The ride had been peaceful for the first several hours since

almost everyone had decided to sleep. The Chief had been awake for the entire ride, hoping to see something vaguely interesting. He was disappointed. After he had submitted to the fact that there was absolutely nothing fascinating about the desert and subjected himself to the torture of boredom for several hours, he felt the person next to him stir in their sleep. The Chief looked over at Amanda, who had chosen to sit next to him. At first, they quietly discussed more theories about O'Malley and plans to take him out, but that wore out its welcome fairly quickly and she had fallen asleep like the others. The Chief had been uneasy when she had leaned against him at first, but had brushed it off. The uneasiness returned when, during what appeared to be a dream about a stuffed animal, she wrapped her arms around his armored bicep. Not wanting to wake her, the Chief had continued to look out of the back of the transport. Since the desert was extremely hot, nobody had kept unnecessary parts of their armor on, which meant that everyone's helmet was lying in their lap. Donut had wanted to remove his codpiece, but a punch to the arm from Grif and an elbow to the ribcage from Simmons squelched that issue as quickly as it had been brought up. When the Chief transferred his gaze from Niatreca to the desert outside, he could have sworn Tex, who was sitting across from him, was staring at him with . . . what? Anger? Contempt? Jealousy? He wasn't sure, but her eyes quickly shut, preventing the Chief to start up conversation. That had been an hour ago, and now Amanda was waking up.

"Sleep well?" the Chief asked.

"Ah," she yawned, "steel pillows aside, yes, I did."

The woman stretched her arms out to get her blood flowing. Then she cracked each individual finger on both of her hands.

"You do that often?" the Chief said.

"Yeah. Started when I was a kid."

"Hmm. Me too."

The Chief opened his mouth slightly and bent his head until it was completely horizontal and almost perpendicular to his right shoulder. The sound of the vertebrae shifting around came out of his mouth in a popping sound. The Chief repeated the process by tilting his head the other way. More popping sounds came from his agape mouth.

"That's gross."

"I know," the Chief said with a smile. After several minutes of silence, the Chief spoke again. "So, any idea how far away we are?"

Amanda looked out the back of the transport then back at the Chief.

"I'm not sure, but when we pass the rock formation that looks like the Grim Reaper, that's the twenty minute mark."

The Chief nodded and continued to stare into the vast expanse of sand that stretched out behind their transport.

"So," Amanda tried to break the uncomfortable silence, "when did you

wake up?"

"Earlier today when your people started setting up camp at the island."

It took several seconds for the words to register. After they did, she looked at him quizzically.

"You were awake the whole time?"

"Yup. I can't be messing up my circadian rhythm, you know."

The woman grinned and looked back out at the desert.

"Oh, there it is. Better wake up the squad, Chief."

The Master Chief looked out of the rear of the transport and saw the only rock formation. It definitely didn't look like the Grim Reaper, although he could see where someone would get the idea. If they squinted their eyes and tilted their head then perhaps it might possibly pass off as the Reaper.

"I dunno, looks more like a clown to me," he thought out loud.

Amanda laughed. "That's what everyone else says."

The Chief took one last look at the rock formation before it faded out of view. He turned to his squad, which was asleep.

He took a deep breath, sucking in the dry desert air. Amanda, seeing the action, covered her ears tightly. Very tightly.

"**WAKE _UP!_**"

The Chief's voice exploded through the passenger section of the Pelican, causing everyone to jump up nearly a foot out of their seats. Amanda, despite her effort to protect herself, heard a loud ringing sound. She slowly uncovered her ears and looked up at the man who had a smile like that of a young boy on his face. His expression faltered when he saw that everyone else was giving him hateful glares.

"We've got twenty minutes before we arrive at the facility, people, let's get ready."

The squad put their helmets on and began making checks on their equipment. The Chief, after making a quick inspection of his SMGs, pulled his shotgun out from under his seat along with a cloth. He went about his business rubbing areas that looked a bit dirty. Amanda looked at the man and his weapon with wide eyes and the face of a little girl on Christmas morning.

"Is that a shotgun, Chief?" she asked.

"Hmm? Oh, yeah, it is. Why, you never seen one up close before?"

"Not in a really long time. Can I . . . hold it?"

The Chief gave her the look of a wary father. "Ok, just don't do anything stupid."

Amanda cast him an angry look before receiving the weapon. She held it at different angles, inspecting every aspect of the weapon.

"Hey, be careful not to fool around with the Chief's barrel," Grif said. "You wouldn't want it going off in your hair!"

The joke caused almost everyone to laugh. The exceptions were Caboose, who didn't get it, Amanda, who blushed and sheepishly returned the weapon to its owner, Tex, who grunted in disgust, Simmons, who was inclined to disapprove of most of the things Grif said and the Chief who had yet to put his helmet on and was giving Grif a look that could melt right through an armada of Blue ships. The laughing ceased immediately stopped.

"Grif, you are a part of my squad, which means you are like a brother to me. However, while I am your commanding officer, you will not treat anyone with that kind of disrespect other than Simmons, Donut and myself. This woman, who is going to help us defeat O'Malley and make this war a helluva lot shorter, deserves none of that nonsense. Especially from you, is that clear?"

"Yes sir. Sorry sir."

"Don't apologize to me, Private, apologize to her."

Grif looked at Amanda. Although he had donned his helmet, everyone knew he was red with embarrassment.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. It won't happen again."

"That's better," the Chief said, and then added "don't make me make you repeat your exchange speech when you gave up your dignity for Doc."

If Grif wasn't wearing his helmet, everyone would have seen a pair of eyes widened in fear. The Chief, being a forgiving man, didn't make another mention of the subject. Everyone finished checking their gear and silently waited for the Pelican to reach its destination. The Chief had wrapped an arm around the still embarrassed and flustered Amanda, offering her solace and many apologies for Grif's behavior. She accepted all of them, thankful that he was there to keep the squad under control.

While to the Chief and almost all of Red Squad this was simply a way to make Amanda feel slightly less embarrassed, Tex looked at it as an advance on another woman. She felt a pang of jealousy. They had spent three nights together inside the same tent with nothing but blankets to cover them and there he was, trying to hit it off with someone he barely knew. Yet, perhaps he was clueless towards feelings indicating that someone wanted to be more than just his friend. He never brought up their nights together during casual conversation and treated her no differently than he did the rest of the squad during the day. Tex pushed the jealousy aside, saving her speculations for another time. She smiled behind her visor as the Chief completely ignored Amanda who was resting her head against his chest.

"We're beginning our descent, people, get ready!" the pilot announced

to the passengers over the comm. system after the twenty minutes had passed.

The Chief felt the Pelican decelerate slightly. Amanda lifted her head from his chest and looked around.

"Finally," the voice that screamed 'I mean business' returned and all events that transpired on the Pelican were forgotten.

She pulled out a small radio no larger than the palm of her hand. "Make sure Commander Schreiber and Professor Chmura are waiting for us when we land," she said into the device. Someone on the other line answered, but the Chief wasn't listening since the Pelican was beginning the landing sequence. They had arrived at Foundation.

* * *

>O'Malley exited his Pelican-Class transport and stepped onto a steel platform. After taking in the beautiful scenery for a moment, the AI and his host entered the large door before him. It opened up into a small hallway where scientists and architects were busy putting up the finishing touches. He walked past them, not giving any one acknowledgement. Another door and O'Malley was in a much larger hallway. The ceiling was paneled with glass and allowed for easy viewing of the sky. The hallway split at the end with massive doors leading off to the left and right. O'Malley wondered why the doors were so big since the only thing that could fit easily through the first two doors was people. The doors leading to the control room were large enough for a tank to drive through. The foolish architect that had wasted the supplies to build the giant doors would be torn apart limb by limb for his incompetence. <p>While O'Malley was dwelling on these thoughts, Sarge took them through the giant doors and down yet another hallway. More scientists and architects were working on the last bits of unfinished wall. Sarge turned left and walked through the final door that led onto a walkway which connected to a circular platform. The room was extremely large, as it housed one of the primary firing mechanisms on the installation as well as the Control Room. O'Malley stepped onto the platform in time to see several more scientists working on a red soldier and a silver metal sphere. Sarge walked up to them.<p>

"How goes the transplant, Burdick?"

Professor Burdick was used to O'Malley creeping up behind him and speaking in a threatening voice. Even still, it sent shivers down his spine.

"Everything is going ahead of schedule, Your Evilness. The Red Prophet's brain was easy to transfer to the Monitor construct and we are completing the AI upgrades now. He'll be up and about shortly."

"Excellent work. I was hoping we would be given a more suitable environment to work in, but I cannot afford to pull my men off of their stations. Those Red fools are drawing closer by the day. My Fortresses on Planet 5 in the Unclaimed System have been overrun by that loathsome Red Squad. It is only a matter of time before they find these installations."

While O'Malley was rambling on about Red Squad, Burdick and his team

of scientists completed the brain transfer. A red light winked on inside the orb and it floated off the table where it was previously sitting. The red light pulsated, indicating that the construct was fully functional.

"Greetings O'Malley," it said. "I am the Monitor of Installation Zero Five."

"Silence you fool," O'Malley said. He wanted to get down to business and had no time for introductions, especially from people that he already knew.

"My apologies, Reclaimer," the Monitor said.

"Reclaimer? Why am I a Reclaimer?"

"You are human. Therefore, you are able to retrieve the Index from the Library and activate this Installation along with the other six. When fired, the Installations will consume all life in this galaxy with calcium stores near or identical to those of human beings. The process will be extremely painful, as most life forms will be slowly vaporized from the inside out."

O'Malley made the smile on Sarge's face even wider, but fell away when he thought about the words that had been spoken.

"Index? Library? What fool would put a library on this Installation? Evil has no time for literature!"

"Perhaps you are unfamiliar with the terms this unit has expressed. The Index is the device which activates the installations. It is a key, more or less. The Library is where the Index is housed. The structure also houses the parasite you created and is mainly used for information gathering and storing. It is, in a sense, a Library."

"I see. So, the brain transfer and the AI upgrades were successful?"

"Very much so, O'Malley. With my new abilities, I will assist you in keeping this installation in serviceable condition for as long as possible."

"Excellent. However, I am needed elsewhere. Since this procedure was successful, contact the other Installations and tell the scientists there to begin the Monitor procedure post haste. Time is running short. The parasite may not be released on schedule, and I still require one last piece to complete my super weapons."

O'Malley brandished the crystal from Sarge's ammo pouch. He concentrated on the strange energies that allowed for teleportation. Since his ship, O'Malley I was in orbit, it was in range for O'Malley to teleport to it. Red rings of energy formed around him and rapidly traveled the expanse of his host body. Instantly, they were standing aboard the ship. Commander Maxis nodded at him upon his arrival and ordered for the ship to set its course for Installation 04. His body had been completed.

To Be Concluded

34. What's Left to Give

Chapter XXXIV

Red Squad had arrived at Foundation after a very long flight. At the facility, old friends and new gear were awaiting their arrival. No amount of gear or friends, however, could prepare the squad for what was to come . . .

"Professor Chmura, Commander Schreiber, allow me to introduce Red Squad," Amanda announced gesturing to the soldiers filing out of the Pelican.

"We've met," Commander Schreiber replied while shaking the Chief's hand.

"It is an honor to meet you," Chmura said.

He was a short man, standing only five feet and four inches tall. Of course, anyone who wasn't encased inside the MJOLNIR armor appeared smaller when standing next to the soldiers. He had short, dark brown hair that matched his eyes of the same color. His hands were slightly blackened and calloused from continuous work on his latest project. His white lab coat sported oil stains and darkened patches from accidental 'mishaps'. Despite his disheveled outward appearance, he was a very kind and friendly person.

"I've heard about your travels and encounters throughout all of this and I am truly amazed. Unfortunately I don't think you'll be able to continue your mission as you are now. Of course that is my assumption based on the information I have received from the OSADU. O'Malley is a secretive thing and it is possible we have overestimated his power--"

"Which would mean that all of the work you've been doing over the past few years was all for not," Amanda interjected.

"Look, this is interesting and all, but I think we should see whatever it is you have for us. Time is of the essence," Master Chief said.

Chmura nodded. "Follow us, then."

Red Squad followed Amanda, Schreiber and Chmura from the drop off zone to the other side of the facility, which was almost completely symmetrical. There were four rooms spaced equally apart. If the one room Red Squad passed was any indication, the other three were extremely busy. After the short walk, Red Squad reached their destination.

"Behold!" Chmura said loudly. "I've always wanted to say 'behold'." He cleared his throat. "Behold! The MJOLNIR armor, Mark Twelve!"

* * *

>Scientists from a multitude of fields were working far past their physical limitations. The super weapon for Installation Zero Four was almost finished, but the main piece of that particular jigsaw puzzle wasn't easy to put into place. All of the measurements had to be perfect. Not a single piece of equipment could be even

infinitesimally misaligned. These were not merely the specifications of a tyrannical overlord; these calculations and measurements had to be perfect, or else the super weapon could misfire. Normally, that wouldn't be such a problem. After the nearly one thousand years of hard work that had been put into these megastructures, however, O'Malley wasn't about to put up with a problem that resulted from laziness. Even the most miniscule error could result in a catastrophic meltdown that would annihilate the solar system it was located in. O'Malley's only problem with that possibility was the deaths of all the people would be instantaneous and relatively painless. That just wouldn't do. <p>The AI itself was currently en route to a building located out on a massive plateau. The Pelican-Class transport touched down at the end of the formation as requested. After it left, O'Malley looked out over the edge of the sheer cliff and off towards the horizon.<p>

"So, our little charade is comin' to an end, huh?" Sarge didn't bother to hide the sadness in his voice.

"I'm afraid so, my friend." O'Malley replied.

Sarge turned away from the setting sun and slowly walked away. The small outpost that was their destination sat not too far from their current position. A copper colored bridge-like structure connected two segments of the cliff edge that were separated by a river. An identical structure ran parallel to the first several meters beneath it. Sarge crossed the ravine and turned right, walking up a hill. Vegetation was scarce on the installations and the only flora on the planet was grass. Seeds from natural plants had been planted in hopes of making the installations look disarmingly peaceful, but they had yet to sprout. The genetically mutated plants, however, had grown at an alarming rate and had almost completely taken over the swamps.

"Whaddya plan on doin to me?"

O'Malley cycled his response through his processing core. His intention had been to kill Sarge once he had requisitioned his new body, but the more he thought about it, the closer he came to changing his mind. Sarge had asked this question previously, but that was before he had been given the chance to prove himself.

"I had planned on granting you a quick and painless death due to your cooperation and assistance in my efforts," O'Malley explained.

"I understand."

"However, in light of recent events," O'Malley paused his response in order to jump off a ledge. "I have decided to spare your life," O'Malley said. Sarge had resumed walking, but stopped when he heard those last words.

"Yeh . . .what? Spare me? Ya mean I get ta live?"

"Even better than that, my friend."

Sarge rounded the cliff wall and the outpost came into view, along with a procession made up of all of O'Malley's Generals, Sergeants and other underlings. O'Malley's personal band was present and began playing his anthem when he came into view. The top scientists from

the genetic and cybernetic fields were present as well.

"All o' this for yer new body? This seems a bit extravagant, O'Malley."

"They aren't here just for me, Sarge."

"Did someone get a promotion?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"You'll see."

Sarge led them through the rows of military personnel. A smaller structure sat close to the main part of the outpost and was almost entirely surrounded by large tubes. The area that wasn't was wide enough for Sarge to walk through. The sergeant followed the small path that the tubes and the outer wall of the structure created until they reached a door. It slid open and Sarge walked inside. The door closed behind them and Sarge led the two down several ramps before arriving at the bottom level. The almost room was circular, but the end where the ramp connected to the floor narrowed slightly. At the opposite end of the basement a familiar figure hovered above the floor, suspended by repulsor fields. O'Malley's body was awaiting its mind.

Thanks to the newest recruit from the Red Army Special Weapons Development, O'Malley's body was encased inside the new MJOLNIR Mark Twelve Point One Combat Suit. Basically, it was the original Mark Twelve, but with the addition of an Electric Discharge System built into the gauntlets of the suit which would allow O'Malley to shoot red lightning from his fingers.

"Well Sarge, this is it. Make sure everything goes according to plan."

"Ya got muh word, O'Malley."

Sarge felt something withdraw from his body, like part of him was leaving. The tingling feeling spread through his feet and worked its way up the man's body until every inch of his body felt like it was asleep. The feeling stopped at the back of his head and he felt the insertion spike pull out of his brain. Sarge was alone inside his body once again, but this time, it was an unwelcome aloneness. The pins and needles feeling dissipated and Sarge watched as the once comatose body began to twitch slightly. O'Malley was interfacing with the neural radio inside of his body's head.

Every time a red light came on, Sarge pressed the appropriate key sequence that unblocked different sections in the radio. O'Malley had to interface with the radio one section at a time to make sure everything was working properly. If O'Malley interfaced with the entire radio at once, the body might encounter irreversible neural complications. The signal from O'Malley that he was ready to progress was the red light and Sarge was in charge of granting the AI access to transfer to other sections of the radio. As he was doing this, strange voices came to his mind.

He'll kill your squad, Sarge, the voice whispered. _He'll kill them all, slowly and painfully._

Sarge typed in another key sequence as the red light beckoned to him.

Think of Simmons, Sarge. He loved you like a father. The voice grew slightly louder. _He was your right hand man. Are you going to betray him?_

The red light called again and Sarge typed in the correct keys, only a bit slower.

What about Donut? He was like a son to you. You could always count on him to get the job done, Sarge. You would allow him to die as well? The voice was no longer a whisper. It was talking to him.

The red light flashed again and Sarge answered it, but with hesitation.

You would let that monster kill Grif instead of doing it yourself? That was one of your aspirations, Sarge. Would you let that go to waste? The voice was not shouting, but it was definitely not an inside voice.

The red light winked at him and Sarge slowly pressed the keys. His responses were growing slower.

_What about your family, Sarge? The ones you swore to protect? Even the man with the garden hose who claimed to be your uncle? Would you let them all down? _The voice was nearing a shouting level.

The red light blinked and Sarge almost input the wrong number sequence.

What about that color, Sarge? Red? You were one of the Red Army's most loyal soldiers. You risked everything countless times to make sure the Blues never won. You would go so far as to turn your back on them? You would leave them in their hour of need? The voice was bellowing into his mind. His vision was becoming slightly blurred and his head was throbbing.

The red light buzzed to life one last time and Sarge paused.

I gave my word . . . and that was all I had left to give.

He keyed the alpha-numeric sequence one last time;
19-5-13-16-5-18-6-9.

The End

* * *

><p>Red vs. Blue: The Master Chief Saga Part
II**

The secrets of O'Malley's Installations

The fate of Private Church, Private Tucker and the Rhinoceros

Master Chief's enigmatic past

The horrible truth about the parasite

The end of it all

Winter 2006

35. Author's Note

AUTHORS NOTE

Ok, I'm just starting junior year at high school and I'm not sure if I'm going to be able to have this up by winter. I will be writing this story whenever I get the chance, but with all the stuff I have to be doing (trying harder to get into college) Part II might not be up until '07. I apologize profusely for this inconvenience, but I'm doing what I can. And if you haven't read this story before and only saw it due to this update, then please, read it and drop a line. You might be a fan of my story, but if you review, I'm a fan of you.

-Grumbles

36. Transmissions

_The following transmissions were intercepted from the Red Army Destroyer-Class space vessel _Bloodbath_ sometime before the Master Chief led his squad away from Blood Gulch Outpost Alpha_. _The transmissions held highly encrypted messages that combined standard army encryptions with unknown, possibly alien ones. Only parts of the packages were recovered, as security installments within the encryption programming deleted a large portion of the actual messages._

_The _Bloodbath_ was unable to trace the source of the transmissions, as they were being bounced off of a crater on a moon that was orbiting the nearby planet. Attempts to trace the transmissions to the source proved futile, and the crews on the _Bloodbath_ were ordered by Red Command to ascertain the destination of the transmissions. The search ended with the discovery of a device the Red Army's Office of Naval Intelligence (RAONI) top scientists believed to be a transwarp communicator. Discovering the destination of the transmissions was deemed impossible, as the destination was no longer a matter of where, but possibly when as well._

1300HR.SPYCOM-U1

_ToHISmIGHTYallPOWeRFULDIVINITY

_SENTBYwy

ENCRIPTION LEVEL-ULTRAMARINE

Sorry for the delay, friend, but as you very well know it goes against my policy to carry out assignments with prototype equipment, especially armor. Proper precautions were necessary. As you

predicted, those two insubordinates abandoned their comrades at Blue Base, leaving them to fend for themselves. It shouldn't be long now before the Reds discover them and move in.

My contact in the urban region in the Turf sector reported the two moving through the area in a warthog. Recent activity in the area has me concerned- \SECURITY PROTOCOL ENACTED: MESSAGE TERMINATED\

0800HR.SPYCOM-U1

** -AlphaHQ**

** -SENTBYwy**

ENCRYPTION LEVEL-ULTRAMARINE

This message is to be transmitted to the Overseer immediately. The mercenary strike force sent to deal with the Red Squad has failed. The Master Chief has indicted the other Blue forces into his ranks and has made altercations to their tank. This should be seen as a serious threat.

Our prowler, Nightscream successfully uploaded an AI programming loyal to our cause into the tank which is set to activate when the tank's profound, powerful, not to mention illegal modifications come online.

The Master Chief has left Blood Gulch Outpost Alpha with his squad in the direction of your to-be-test-subjects. I hope we- \SECURITY PROTOCOL ENACTED: MESSAGE TERMINATED\

1560HR.LKOUTTRNSCOM1

** - ToHISmIGHTYallPOWeRFULDIVINITY**

** -Lieutenant Sawyer**

ENCRYPTION LEVEL-SEQUOIA

\ENACTED SECURITY PROTOCOL TERMINATED AT SOURCE: POSSIBLE ERROR?\ - .
. .might sound a bit odd, but when Private Church approaches your position, make absolutely sure you are in front of him. Do not fire at him, do not engage in anything other than taunting remarks with him. If you fail to comply with your own orders, everything you've worked so hard for will be moot. Just do as you say, leave Church alone, and everything will turn out for the better. For the love of God, he's got a bomb in his chest . . .

9:37:14pm. RLCTRNSCOM4

** -INSTALLATIONS**

** -Master Architect Krain**

ENCRYPTION LEVEL-DULL YELLOW RED

I'm going to have to ask that everyone dons their temporal displacement nullifiers. Scans show an error on Installation 05 that jeopardizes the structural integrity of the Control Room that was

done roughly two hundred years ago. Simply put; those doors need to be taller and wider.

Just a brief reminder to everyone, make sure if you've been ordered to- \SECURITY PROTOCOLS ENACTED: MESSAGE TERMINATED\

0700HR.EMERGENCYTRANSMISSION

** -OXFRTSWRLD**

** - AlphaHQ- PRIORITY CLASS-OPTIMUS**

ENCRYPTION LEVEL-FIRE

This facility just received a tight-beam transmission from our transwarp satellite in orbit. We think it hit us because we're closest and since it had such a high priority, that's our best guess. The message was too garbled to relay directly, but we got a good portion of it.

Something went horribly wrong with the whole thing. O'Malley's plan seems to have failed miserably. The parasite was either released or escaped and spread through its containment like a flood, infecting everything.

We were ordered to terminate the parasite, but the sender could not be identified nor could the location of the transmission. O'Malley is expected to receive the message in several days time, since he's in subspace on his way here. With all the weirdness with the breach in security at Lockout a few days ago and the- \MESSAGE TERMINATED AT SOURCE: CODEsndrKIATrmnlDDU: COLOSSUS FACILITY BREACHED: RED ALERT\

-

Something to tide you over until I start putting new chapters up, which will be soon I hope. I finished Ghosts of Onyx (awesome and Grumbles recommended) and got some inspiration from reading it. Enough to set my priorities in order. When Part 2 comes up, I'll post it here to make it easier to read for continuity purposes.

End
file.